

T H E N E W
A D V E N T U R E S

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DOWN

L A W R E N C E M I L E S

DOWN

**'MANKIND EXPECTS PAIN. HOWEVER IT SEEMS
TO OUTSIDERS.'**

Tyler's Folly: a colony world on the unattractive side of Earthspace, a planet wracked by earthquakes and plagued by off-world bodysnatchers. When the local authorities pull a bedraggled Professor Bernice Summerfield out of the ocean in an off-limits 'quake zone, they naturally want to know what she is doing there... but the professor can only mumble something about woolly mammoths and sabre-tooth tigers.

According to Bernice, the planet is hollow, its interior inhabited by warring tribes of cavemen and strangely unconvincing prehistoric monsters. Some dark and ancient god rules this underground kingdom - albeit a dark and ancient god with a penchant for thirties pulp adventures and Saturday morning action serials.

Can Bernice's claims be true? Is Tyler's Folly really under threat from an ageless subterranean horror? And why does so much of her story revolve around the utterly amoral alien known as !X...?

T H E N E W A D V E N T U R E S

LAWRENCE MILES is the author of the acclaimed novel **Christmas on a Rational Planet**, although he's using the word 'acclaimed' just as loosely as all the other New Adventures writers do. You'll be glad to hear that this one makes just as much sense.

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‘Good eventag,’ burbled a voice in Bernice’s ear. ‘Please do not waste your strength trying to escape, ja? You are quite unable to move.’

‘I know,’ said Bernice, testily. ‘I’m attached to an operating slab by durilium electro-clamps.’

A second figure stepped into view. This man was taller, and wore the same uniform as the goons who’d tranquillized her in the jungle. He seemed to be bald under his leather cap, and wore a pair of wire-rimmed glasses. His features reminded Bernice of a toad that had swallowed something slightly larger than its face.

‘Professor Summerfield, I assume?’ he said.

Bernice glared at him. ‘Let me guess. You re the leader of my local fan club, and you’ve decided to kidnap me as an indication of your obsessive love. Am I close?’

T H E N E W

A D V E N T U R E S

DOWN
Lawrence Miles

NA

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Bernice Summerfield originally created by Paul Cornell

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Firstly, Down reintroduces us to the People, the super-civilized aliens who first appeared in Ben Aaronovitch's New Adventure The Also People (Virgin Publishing, 1995, ISBN 0426 20456 5). In case you haven't read Ben's book. Down recaps all the important details, but anyone who wants to know more about the culture of the People should give it a look.

Secondly, I'd like to thank the TV stations of Great Britain for screening At the Faith's Core, The People that Time Forgot, Journey to the Centre of the Earth, and Flash Gordon's Trip to Mars over the Christmas 1996 period when this book was being written. It made the 'research' so much easier.

Thirdly, and most importantly, this isn't all there is to Down. I wrote more background material than I could comfortably squeeze into 300(-ish) pages, so anyone vaguely interested in the 'missing matter' might like to find themselves an Internet terminal and access <http://www.ndirect.co.uk/~shebeen> (this should get you to the Shebeen homepage, and the way to the Down appendices is signposted from there).

*Dedicated to Jessica,
who showed me her pants.*

PROLOGUE

THE WORLDSPHERE

The mad were given a continent all to themselves. When the worldsphere was constructed, everyone agreed this was only fair. After all, there was no shortage of space: at that time, there were only about one thousand billion People, and the sphere was big enough to accommodate trillions more. That was the great thing about living in an artificial world, the People told themselves. You could build continents to order.

So the mad, or as they were politely known, the Truly Crazy, were given their own landmass, the *siCeralca ri!Qisla*, where they could get on with their lives without bothering the rest of the People. God - which was the name the People gave to the sentience who managed the sphere, then only a very young and very small artificial intelligence, a mere sixty-eight million times smarter than the average humanoid - promised that the inhabitants of the *ri!Qisla* would be looked after as well as everyone else. Every now and then, the personologists would visit the 'asylum continent', talking to the inmates, perhaps even feeding them exciting new drugs invented by the Unusual Psychopharmacy Interest Group.

There was no pressure on the Truly Crazy to get well. The People believed that if the mad were left to their own devices, with perhaps a little compassion and biochemistry on the side, things would sort themselves out sooner or later. And it worked. It actually worked. One by one, the psychoses vanished, and one by one, the once-mad left the *ri!Qisla*. Those who still harboured the odd neurosis became great artists, while those who'd developed bodily anxieties were shown the fabulous new DNA exercises the People had

developed, and many found happiness by becoming exotic fish or brightly coloured lizards.

However, there was an exception. Isn't there always?

One inmate refused to leave the land of the Truly Crazy. Refused to let himself get better, or even acknowledge that he was one of the People. When the personologists went to visit him in the siCeralca rilQisla, to ask him how they could help, he did terrible things to them, things mankind (and the word is used loosely, as none of the People were human, not even those who'd kept to the old two-arms-two-legs-one-head-no-gills formation) had forgotten were even possible.

His actions sent shockwaves through the worldsphere. The People couldn't force the madman to be cured, of course; it was against their principles to force anybody to do anything. But if he was dangerous enough to overcome the safeguards God had built into the asylum, then perhaps he was dangerous enough to escape. Too dangerous to set free, too dangerous to leave alone... what, then, could the People do?

Finally, God thought of something, and the problem of the Last of the Truly Crazy was solved. The other People got on with their lives, in peace, harmony and tranquillity.

That was some time ago.

Fos!ca tried not to look up, but the laws of aesthetics were against her. The statue was there to be stared at. Well, obviously. All statues are there to be stared at, especially those that just happened to be twenty-two kilometres high and sculpted out of cold-fused mercury.

Fos!ca surrendered to art, and raised her head.

Even from ground level, from beneath the ten-kilometre ceremonial arch between the giant's legs, you could see its head. The shoulders were wreathed in silver clouds, strands of crystal-seeded candy-puff, stretching psychedelic reflections of the statue's face across the sky. God had crafted those clouds, had set them in motion generations ago. Instructing them to break open at regular intervals and fill up the reservoir in the giant's cupped left hand. Concrete veins would pump the rain across the shoulder blades and

along the far arm, watering the city that sat in the palm of the right hand.

Nine thousand people lived in that city. Before now, Fos!ca hadn't been any closer to the eRup colossus than the Copperhead Floods, where she'd watched the waterfalls slipping through the statue's fingers, the surplus from the city's irrigation systems dissipating on the wind long before it hit the ground. The sight had made her ill. Nothing, she'd thought, had a right to be that big.

Now it was worse. Oh, yes, much worse.

The head had been disfigured, its mutilated features smeared across the sky by the clouds. The face of the architect eRup, who had envisioned the statue and insisted on sculpting it into his own likeness - or sculpting his own likeness into that of the statue; legends varied - had been scraped away, making Fos!ca wonder what but the grace of God could have destroyed an image two kilometres from ear to ear. Other, cruder, features had been drilled into the head. Two holes in the face for eyes. A new expression scratched across the mercury.

And even the clouds... their silver linings had been torn out, replaced with deep reds and muddy purples, turning them into ugly bruises that blotted out the sun at the centre of the worldsphere. Something dark and winelike trickled between the fingers of the giant's city hand.

'God,' Fos!ca squealed. 'God?'

'God is dead,' said a voice. Male. Soft. Apologetic, possibly. 'My fault. I'm speaking quite literally, of course.'

Instantly, Fos!ca turned. (*Not instantly. You'd like to think so, but you're still in shock. There's no way you can move that fast.*) Thirty paces away was the bottom of the great mercury stairway, the first of the 40,000 steps that spiralled around the statue's right heel and up into the secret caverns of eRup's crotch. The steps were littered with unfamiliar shapes as far up as the eye could see.

No. The shapes were familiar, but the context -

An automatic mental function somewhere in the vicinity of Fos!ca's forebrain told her to ignore the shapes for now.

Instead, she concentrated on the figure who sat fifteen steps up, hands folded. feet resting on the next step down. His clothes were basic - no apparent style, no social indicator to tell Fos!ca anything about him. Fos!ca suddenly felt conscious of her own clothing, her passivity-grey psychosensitive suit squirming over her shoulders as if it desperately wanted to be somewhere else all of a sudden. *(He makes you feel that way. He makes you feel uncomfortable. Ugly, even. Don't react.)*

'We're leaving?' the figure asked, politely. Like the statue's, his features looked as though they'd been deliberately chiselled away, leaving two dark eyes and a mouth that never even twitched. His skin was pale, hairless, smooth as plastic.

The Last of the Truly Crazyed.

silXist-ilxatl-iValqara.

!X.

Fos!ca took a deep breath. Stomach in. Chest out. Remember all the training, she told herself, all the Do[EO]C's lessons in posture and body language.

'Good afternoon,' she said, formally. 'How are you today?'

!X raised a near-translucent hand. 'Please. Stop. No concessions to protocol. Not here. You're from the Do[EO]C?'

'I come as a representative of the Department of [Entirely Optional] Corrections. On behalf of God. Erm. Yes.'

'God is dead. I told you. My fault.' !X tilted his head a little, like a man listening to birdsong. 'The Do[EO]C... I must be the sole reason for its existence, now. True?'

Fos!ca shook her head. 'No. No. We study many of the great historical psychotics. Erm. Not that I'm suggesting you're psychotic. That is -'

'I understand.' !X nodded thoughtfully, and nudged a shape on the step below him with the toe of his hoot. It tumbled down the stairway, its arms flapping uselessly, leaving sticky brown markings on the cold-fused mercury as it went.

Fos!ca jumped. This was, of course, the first time she'd ever seen a genuine corpse.

The body landed on the quicksilver paving slabs at the bottom of the steps, face up. Its eyes were wide and wet, set

into a face softened by cosmetic chromosomal treatment, but (here were messy blotches under the olive skin where !X's cytotoxins had exploded inside the blood vessels. The body was wearing a passivity-grey psychosensitive suit, which had died and hardened around its owner's shoulders. The shape was far too familiar for Fos!ca to recognize at once.

Finally, she screamed. It was, of course, the first time she'd ever screamed.

'I heard you'd be coming,' !X explained, politely. 'It didn't take long to find you here.'

(Don't react. He wants you to react. He wants to make you feel threatened. Think of him as a patient, not a monster. Remember the Credo-Mantra, the only word of advice God ever gave the Do[EO]C, filtering it through a cultural decanter so everyone could understand it in their own terms. Maybe every Paradise has its snake to outsmart, went the Credo-Mantra. Maybe every primitive has its story to offer.)

'It's not real,' Fos!ca gabbled. 'It's not my body. They gave you a universe or your own. God made it for you. You wouldn't let them cure you. They gave you a universe of your own. It's not my body. It's not the real world. It's just the asylum. It's just Paradise.'

'It's the world that counts. A stronger, better world.' !X didn't so much stand as unfold. His body wasn't particularly tall or well built, but his limbs were tough and slippery, all nerves and sinews. 'God is dead here. The oceans are burning. The earth is coughing up neurotoxins no one dreamt would ever be engineered. People who've lived in perfect safety all their lives, who never asked for anything but the chance to wallow in their own torpor, are choking to death on the blood and the smoke. In their billions. Can you understand that?'

He nodded to himself.

'Mankind expects pain,' he concluded. 'However it seems to outsiders. Are we leaving?'

(Don't react.)

'I said, are we leaving?'

(Mankind expects pain. You hear the same kind of thing from the Truth Through Ugliness people, the ones who turn themselves into cubist portraits or lake to the seas as Quiet Leviathans. None of them ever visit Paradise, though. None of them ever get to see this.)

'You know where we're going?' Fos!ca croaked.

'Yes. There's a planet. Seventeen galaxies away. God wants... us... to investigate. To survey. I've already been briefed.' He moved down the stairway, carefully stepping over the familiar-unfamiliar shapes in his path.

'That's not true,' blurted Fos!ca. 'God thinks you might be interested in, in, in visiting the site. That's all. God thinks... the Department thinks that such an excursion would be positive exploratory therapy, hastening your recovery from... from neurosis.' She was quoting whole sentences from her briefing now, and she wondered if !X could tell.

'No. No, I don't think so.' He paused at the bottom of the steps. 'To summarize. God wishes to investigate recent events outside his sphere of influence, and knows even the TBIIG can't be trusted to find a suitable agent. I'm to be God's puppet, then.'

'That's not true. Not at all. By treaty, we're forbidden to interfere in that part of space. The People can't -'

'I'm not one of the People,' !X cut in, blandly. 'I removed myself. Or had myself removed. Not part of your society, not part of your universe. We're leaving now?'

Fos!ca took another deep breath.

'Yes,' she said. 'We're leaving now.'

'Good. You know today's magic word?'

She nodded. !X stared at her, silently, waiting.

'Storytime,' Fos!ca said.

The universe called Paradise obediently folded itself away into a corner, and the two of them returned to the real world. Such as it was.

REALITY

The planet had been named Tyler's Folly, as (a) it had been discovered by a man called Jodecai Tyler, and (b) everyone had said that colonizing the place was a stupid idea. Not that there was anything wrong with the world, in itself. It was what the Lord High Civil Servants of Earth liked to call a 'wet prospect', a class MG planet with a surface largely covered in ocean and an atmosphere that needed only slight tweaking to make it E-Normal. A good place for exotic hydroponics projects, the bureaucrats might have said, if not ideal for large-scale colonization.

The problem was this: Tyler's Folly was in exactly the wrong part of Earthspace. It orbited the most obscure star of the Cygnus Mortis constellation, and even if you could ignore the fact that it was (metaphorically) miles away from any useful travel routes, the 'Dying Swan' sector was known to be occupied by non-manforms, which hardly did wonders for local real estate values. Nonetheless, Jodecai Tyler had dutifully planted the Earth Standard on one of the planet's larger islands, and had uttered the inevitable 'In the Name of the Presidential Electorate' speech. Earth had been going through one of its manic expansionist phases at the time, so the authorities had shipped a podload of settlers to the place, just to show willing.

Sixty years later, the descendants of those settlers had singularly failed to turn Tyler's Folly into any kind of success. Nothing grew there, nothing much happened there. Eventually, the Tylerkind - tired of having to observe Earth customs in an environment where 'normal' human protocol was entirely meaningless - decided to declare themselves independent, and the Republican Security Force staged a military coup nobody really had the will to resist. Soon, the Folly became one of a hundred bleak, grey, miserable upstart

worlds waiting for Earth Central's gunships to turn up and put the locals back in line.

What with the threat of the gunships, the Republic's we're-not-quite-a-police-state-but-we're-getting-there attitude, and the increasing number of unexpected (and unexplained) earthquakes that racked the planet, Tyler's Folly was not a great place to be in early 2594. All things considered.

The office was small, stuffy, and had walls that were too dull to even bother being grey properly. A chunkputer sat on the mock-teak desk like an ugly little goblin, its display screen flashing tiny drunken icons at Pupp, knowing full well he wouldn't understand any of them. The chunkputer was a needlessly large and bulky device, designed specifically for those who hated dealing with fiddly little micromicroputers. Pupp had foolishly assumed this would make the machine ideal for the layman.

Even apart from his mounting technophobia, Officer Quinton Pupp of the Republican Security Force was a troubled man. This wasn't unusual: Pupp had been attached to the station for nigh on thirty years, since the days when the Force had been nothing more than a local police group with electro-prods and a grudge against Earth Central. 'Troubled' was therefore a natural state of mind for him. Troubled by Earth, troubled by the quakes, troubled by this, troubled by that.

However, on this particular day, Officer Pupp was troubled by something entirely new and deeply strange. He wasn't enjoying the experience.

Pupp jammed a dataslice into the input slot of the chunkputer, then cursed, pressed the 'eject' button, and pushed it back in the right way round. The dataslice contained an arrest record, dated 22/1/94, the subject being the woman who now occupied cell 13 of this station. The woman who had been apprehended in the middle of an off-limits quake zone, with no explanation for her presence there other than the most ridiculous story Pupp had heard since the Imperial propaganda newscasts had put the Earth

Empire's gunboat attack on Criptostophon down to 'unusual sunspot activity'. The woman who was, in short, the cause of Pupp's current unease.

She'd been in the cell since yesterday, when she'd been pulled out of the ocean off the coast of Port Lindenbrook. One of the patrol junks had been heading for a nearby islet group during a particularly violent quake, on the lookout for corpse-looters. According to the arrest report, the junk had been passing an uninhabited chunk of rock called McClure's Atoll when something dark-haired and lumpy had popped out of the water in front of the boat.

Pupp had already watched the footage of the arrest, taken by the constable who'd dragged the woman out of the sea. Last summer, a bunch of civil rights freaks from the Stellenbosch VI Nelson Mandela Memorial Commune had turned up on Tyler's Folly, claiming the Republic was using 'inhuman and fascistic' policing methods, and since then the Force had installed microcameras in all its constables' patrol helmets. They recorded arrests on vid-spools these days, to prove that the Republic used maiming force only when it was absolutely necessary.

When the woman had been hauled on to the junk, and had flopped across the deck like a dead fish, she'd gargled some words, which Pupp had replayed several times, just to make sure he'd heard them correctly.

'Glug,' the woman had said. 'Glug. Bugger. Bugger. What happened to the commander?'

The woman had been arrested on suspicion of being a corpse-looter, but that one word had set Pupp's mind on a different tack. Commander.

Suggesting a military connection.

Earth?

The preliminary report on Pupp's desk informed him of the woman's (alleged) identity. She was an off-worlder, as a quick genetic once-over had proved. A check with the records at the spaceport had supplied the Security Force with the name she travelled under. According to her transit ID, she was an inhabitant of the planet Dellah, attached to the university

there. The ID had blandly stated that she was here to conduct 'research', and that her passage to Tyler's Folly had been arranged by one Professor Divson Follett, Head of Archaeology.

Pupp had always felt there was something sinister about Dellah, and liked to think of it as an Imperial intelligence-gathering operation in disguise. The planet was worryingly close to Tyler's Folly, no more than eight or nine light years away. Part of the same constellation, according to Earth perspectives. And now this...

'Computer,' he said, in case the stupid machine thought he was talking to himself. 'Link up to the, er... datanet? The datanet of the planet Dellah.' He almost said 'please', but made up for it by scowling at the screen. 'When you've done that, get me into the tiles of St Oscar's University.'

It took the fastline link a couple of seconds to get to Dellah and back, then the screen lit up with several paragraphs of welcoming text, in big blue friendly letters. Opening a link to a computer on an Earth-controlled world made Pupp itchy. You heard so much about computer viruses these days, diseases that would be broken down into data impulses, beamed along fastline links, and reassembled at the other end. WELCOME TO THE ST OSCAR'S DATABASE INFORMATION TERMINUS! the screen read. And underneath, somebody had electroscrawled, THE FACILITY THAT DARE NOT SPEAK ITS ACRONYM. Pupp didn't know what an acronym was, but it sounded like some obscene student joke, so he made the effort and frowned disapprovingly.

'Personnel files,' he demanded. 'Personal data on all university members connected with any... any recent "expedition" to Tyler's Folly.'

The chunkputer did as it was bidden, using the Force's counter-counter-espionage software to navigate the database. The machine reported that the database was currently being 'spring-cleaned', so a lot of its security systems were already off line. Finally, the information splashed itself across the screen, though curiously the database claimed there were

three individuals connected with this 'expedition', not two, as the spaceport records of Fort Lindenbrook had -

Something popped out of the machine towards Pupp's face. Reflexively, he ducked, before recognizing it as a holograph portrait, a cheap head-and-shoulders image hovering a couple of centimetres in front of his face and leering stupidly.

The face belonged to a woman, in her early twenties, if Pupp was any judge. She was thin and pink-faced, not tanned, as such, but she looked like she'd spent a lot of time outdoors, her skin having that 'worn-in' look. Her hair was tinted red and cut short, in a style that was almost military. There was a tiny golden stud in one of her ears, another hammered into the side of her nose.

Pupp scanned the ID/personality data accompanying the image. The woman's name, according to the file, was Ash Juliandis. Student at the university, attached to the Neuroseismology Department, whatever that was. 'Ash' short for 'Ashtaroth', not 'Ashley' (parents: Neo-Gnostic Judaists), propensity for hi-chic combat fashion and military haircuts despite belonging to various anti-Imperial student protest groups. The Information Terminus psycheprofile detected a 13/19 possibility of a minor hormonal imbalance.

Anti-Imperial tendencies? It seemed unlikely. If the university was involved with Earth Central, as Pupp suspected, this could have been a smokescreen for the woman's activities as an agent of the Empire. Pupp frowned. 'Next,' he said.

The floating face vanished up its own nostrils. The subject of the second file looked about the same age as the Juliandis individual, though the resemblance ended there. The woman had blonde hair, with a fringe that hung just over the tops of her eyes. Her face was pale, with little brownish freckles visible against the skin. Wide mouth, small nose, eyes that looked like they were squinting all the time. The woman appeared nervous, though Pupp wasn't sure if it was an inbuilt feature of her face, or if she just didn't like having her picture taken.

Lucretia Scannon, the text on the puter screen told him. Also a student, also connected with Neuroseismology. Propensity for large dufflecoats and trivial neuroses. Marked phobia of certain aquatic life forms, suffers from 'molecular vertigo'. The Terminus suggested a 17/20 possibility that, at any given time, Ms Scannon would be having a Bad Hair Day. It also calculated a 16/20 chance of her next serious relationship being very very miserable indeed.

Pupp had no idea why the files contained so much ridiculous personal information. He put it down to some kind of software glitch. Most semi-intelligent computer systems tended to be a little on the eccentric side, he'd heard. 'Next,' he said.

The third and final holograph was instantly familiar. The face belonged to the woman in cell 13. Her portrait was smiling happily, or perhaps drunkenly. According to the file, her current whereabouts were unknown - naturally, thought Pupp - but the Terminus suggested that, wherever she was, there was a 19/20 possibility of a fight starting at some point in the near future.

'Off,' Pupp told the machine.

The image phased out of existence, and the puter politely severed all links between itself and Dellah before shutting down its power supply. A new face filled the screen. Pupp very nearly ducked again.

His own reflection, of course. A balding 2D shadow smeared across the plexiglass. Pupp automatically started smoothing the top of his head, checking for any signs of premature saltwater wrinkling. The skin was still smooth, thankfully, and his ears were still stuck flat against the sides of the skull, with no traces of the embarrassing webbing that often came with middle age.

Evolution worked fast, here on the edge of human space. The Tylerkind were human-ish rather than human, a subspecies adapted for life on a world where weather conditions were more than a little erratic and the surface was 92 per cent water. That was the core of the planet's claim to independence, after all. Genetic autonomy. A few strands of

nucleic acid, that was all that stood between Tyler's Folly and the Empire.

Pupp glanced at the wall hanging on the far side of his office. It was the only decoration in the room, a stylized monochrome portrait of the Face of the Republic, nonhuman characteristics proudly exaggerated. Beneath the illustration, in military stencil, was the legend MOVE HEAVEN AND EARTH TO DEFEND THE LIFE OF CHAIRMAN MANX.

Like the little electronic goblin on the desk, the portrait was computerized. The picture was linked to the local Republican newsnet. Should anything happen to the Chairman – an Imperial assassin's bullet, say, or a sudden and suspicious terminal disease – the poster would automatically re-form itself, to bear the name and likeness of the new Chairman. These days, Pupp found himself glancing up at the portrait a couple of dozen times a day.

Just making sure, he told himself.

Just making sure the world as he knew it was still there.

'An end to Imperial agitation,' Pupp muttered, reciting the First Credo of the Republic. 'The Spirit of Independence is alive and well on Tyler's Folly.'

With that, he stood, somewhat stiffly, and walked out of the office. He'd learnt all he could from the chunkputer. It was time to visit cell 13.

The office was silent in Pupp's wake. The only eyes on the officer's desk were those of Chairman Manx, and he had no reason to react as the chunkputer switched itself back on. The screen fluttered, the machine fastwinding back through the files it had retrieved from Dellah. Then it deactivated itself again.

Had anyone familiar with twenty-sixth-century computer technology been present, he would have correctly guessed that something had eaten its way into the systems of the puter, poring over the data Pupp had sucked out of the university database. He also would have pointed out that, as the machine was powered down when the process began, this was theoretically impossible. The RRR-103 chunkputer can't

be activated remotely, the imaginary expert would doubtless have said, pushing his spectacles back up his nose.

Nevertheless, it had happened.

* * *

The cell was sparse and functional. That wouldn't have surprised anyone. The walls had been painted a featureless white, but the whiteness was broken up by dubious stains and dirty fingerprints. There wasn't much floor space, and the cell was furnished with a simple sleeping slab at the far end. The Security Force hadn't gone as far as supplying a bucket.

The prisoner sat hunched up on the slab, her boots hanging over the edge, her arms dangling limply by her sides. She could have been anything from twenty to fifty, thought Pupp; hard guessing someone's age when they looked like a drowned rodent. Her hair was dark, and plastered against a pale forehead. Her eyes were bright, but blurry. She wore a shirt and breeches, stuck to her sopping body in a manner that wasn't quite thorough enough to be attractive, and a pair of battered brown leather boots. The clothes were ripped, as if they'd been bitten open, though the woman's flesh seemed unmarked. She looked for all the world like an old-fashioned adventurer. An old-fashioned adventurer who was thoroughly worn out and thoroughly miserable.

Pupp noticed bloody lines in her eyes as he approached her, and this close, he could make out odd streaks of purple in her hair. Then he picked up the smell. Salty, sweaty, and... there wasn't really a word for it. Except, possibly, 'dirty'. He couldn't be more specific than that. Pupp's nostrils twitched.

'Oh, do I offend?' the woman croaked. 'I do apologize.'

Pupp steeled himself. He'd been expecting this kind of thing. The men who'd tried interrogating the prisoner yesterday had failed spectacularly. Each time they'd threatened her, or pointed out that people who didn't cooperate with them tended to have accidents while shaving - yes, even the women - the prisoner had been generally sardonic, and/or mocked their manhoods. They hadn't been

prepared for that. They hadn't even been sure whether, according to the Secure Convention, having your manly potency questioned was a good enough reason to use the electro-prods.

'Ms Summerfield?' Pupp intoned, grimly.

'*Professor Summerfield*,' coughed the woman. Lord, she sounded sick. 'Are you the head of this asylum, or just the best-dressed inmate?'

'You have no formal qualifications according to the Republican Education Standard,' Pupp recited. 'You cannot therefore be considered to have any formal academic standing while on this planet.'

'I want to talk to the university. Get me a fastline link to Dr Follett. Now.'

Pupp frowned a false frown. 'I'm sorry, Ms Summerfield. You already waived your right to off-world communications access.'

'I did what?'

'Oh, yes. According to our reports, when arrested and informed of your rights, you said - and I'm quoting you word for word here - "bugger, bugger, what happened to the commander?"' Pupp smiled in a self-satisfied manner, more to irritate the prisoner than anything else. 'Why are you on this planet, Ms Summerfield?'

Summerfield glared at him. 'I'm researching.'

'In an off-limits earthquake zone? Researching what?'

'Primitive forms of law and order in mis-evolved barbarian societies.'

Pupp actually felt himself flinch. 'Ms Summerfield, I'd remind you that the death penalty is still an option here, however "liberal" your own world might be. You were found floating in the waters near McClure's Atoll. McClure's Atoll has been the site of severe subaqueous earthquake activity for four months now. I say you're a professional corpse-looter. What do *you* say?'

Actually, Pupp didn't really think that at all. Certainly, whenever Tyler's Folly had a spate of quakes, the alien parasites would come flooding in. Pro neuro-doners would

somehow slip past customs, and spend weeks hanging around the quake areas, digging bodies out of the ruins and sucking synaptic fluids out of their heads. And worse than the grave-robbers, there were the scientists. Four months ago, when the earthquakes had cracked the sea bed open near the port, the locals had begun seeing things in the water. Hell-spawned mutant fish, allegedly, vomited out of the earth after the quakes. The Force had no proof these creatures even existed, but days after the first of the sightings, the marine biologists had started to turn up on the planet. The authorities had banned all scientists from visiting the Folly, but a few of them still managed to get in, masquerading as members of more honest professions, Like arms traders or pimps.

But no. 'Professor' Summerfield was something else. Something much worse, if Pupp's suspicions were correct. He decided to play dumb, see if he could get her to trip over her own sense of sarcasm.

'Don't be ridiculous,' Summerfield snapped. 'Why would I be body-looting in the middle of an ocean? Look, I'm tired. You haven't let me sleep since I got here. I haven't eaten anything in days. I'm not at my best, basically. Why not leave me alone and see if I feel more talkative in the morning?'

'It is the morning, Ms Summerfield. All right, let's try a different approach. How did you end up in the ocean?'

'You wouldn't believe me if I told you.'

'Oh yes. I've read the statement you made yesterday.' Pupp motioned to the constable hovering around the door of the cell, and the man shuffled forward, clutching a scratchboard. Pupp took it from him, examining it with exaggerated intensity. 'Let's see. "The sabre-toothed tigers... there were tigers everywhere." That's your statement?'

Summerfield just slouched at him.

"The centre of the world," Pupp continued. "The world. This planet. Hollow. There are things living there. The mammoths. Other things. The tribe. The tribe."

'I was tired and upset.' Summerfield mumbled. 'I should've kept my mouth shut.'

“You don’t understand. You don’t understand. It’s still down there. It’ll follow us out. Why won’t you listen to me? It’s hollow. The whole world is hollow.”“ Pupp decided to employ a weapon used by the police across the universe, and got smug. ‘Ms Summerfield, I’ve lived on this planet all my life. I’m fairly sure I’d know about it if there were monsters living under the surface.’

‘Makes you nervous, though, doesn’t it?’ Summerfield hissed.

Pupp’s jaw froze. Only briefly.

Nervous? he wanted to say. Of course I’m nervous. The people are waiting for the gunboats, they’re seeing sea monsters off the coast and UFOs over the port, there’s a hundred and one omens of doom waiting in the wings, and for all I know you’re only here to make things worse. The end of the Republic -

Pupp’s jaw unfroze, and he got on with his job.

‘Exhibit B,’ he said, through gritted teeth. The constable remained blank-faced as he passed Pupp the brown plastic satchel. ‘Is this your bag?’

Summerfield didn’t reply. The bag had been slung around the prisoner’s neck when she’d been dragged out of the sea, but the pouches were eezy-sealed, so the water hadn’t damaged any of the contents. There were two battered-looking tomes at the bottom of the bag, plus sundry trivial items including a silver cigarette lighter and a pack of playing cards with illustrations ‘celebrating feminist arachnid erotica’. The spaceport’s scanning mechanisms weren’t primed to target alien pornography, Pupp remembered, so this particular artefact must have slipped under the net. He fished the smaller of the two books out, then maliciously dropped the satchel to the floor.

‘Now, isn’t that interesting?’ he said, brushing the front cover of the book. The cover was made of cowhide, apparently genuine synth-grown leather, but the pages inside were torn, singed, and waterlogged, in that order. As Pupp brushed the tome, a fine layer of white dust drifted from his fingers. ‘Into a little drug-smuggling, are we?’

‘Oh, grow up,’ said Summerfield.

Pupp flipped through the book, the spine creaking ominously every few pages. The sheets were covered in spindly handwriting, the text accompanied by a variety of faded maps and illustrations. Pupp had already inspected the volume, and the pictures were just as ridiculous as Summerfield’s testimony. Ludicrous ape creatures, detailed profiles of semi-evolved humans. Rough sketches of sea monsters.

Sea monsters.

Of course I’m nervous...

He shut the book. ‘That’s enough,’ he growled. ‘You will tell me the truth. I want the whole story, or I’ll be forced to use the mind probe.’ That, of course, was the euphemistic name given by the Security Force to the red-hot poker, the closest thing to a mind probe on this side of Earthspace. Summerfield retained her composure remarkably well.

‘The whole story?’ she said, emotionlessly.

Pupp felt himself relax, a little. He nodded.

‘From the beginning?’

‘From the beginning.’

‘You won’t believe it,’ Summerfield told him.

Pupp scowled at her. ‘Now,’ he demanded.

The prisoner took a deep breath.

‘All right then,’ she said. ‘I’ll tell you. It won’t do either of us any good, but I’ll tell you. It goes something like this...’

‘THE NIGHTMARE BEGINS!’

‘The Grail of Zzzztii,’ pronounced the Tashwari. He grasped (he cup between two of his most prominent hands, and lifted it as reverently as someone with absolutely no religious convictions could.

‘So?’ said Ash.

The Tashwari fixed her with a solemn stare. ‘So?’ he repeated. ‘So? It was in this very vessel that the Seed of Life itself was brought to Dellah, and thereafter scattered to the eighteen winds of creation by the Seeders.’

Ash told the Tashwari she had absolutely no idea what he was talking about. She did this by looking entirely uninterested.

‘The Seeders! The Ancient Godly Ones! They who walked the pathways of time before time itself was poured into being! It’s an established fact, in the writings of all fashionable archaeologists, that the Seeders were the oldest civilization. They are spoken of in the myths of every civilized world. Except the damn Goll - pardon the language - but they’re too stupid to have myths. Why, these are among the last Seeder artefacts left in the universe!’

Ash cast an eye over the other items spread out across the Tashwari’s hovva-counter. A dozen or so misshapen artefacts, each one the colour of cheap plastic. Technically, cheap plastic could be any colour, but there were certain hues of beige that were exclusive to Tupperware.

‘Reduced to clear,’ the Tashwari added, hurriedly.

The Tashwari had incredibly strict customs regarding trade and commerce, Ash had learnt; certainly, it never failed to amaze her that, however bad a Tashwari trader’s English might have been, phrases like ‘reduced to clear’, ‘everything

must go', and 'fire-damaged stock' would roll off his myriad tongues without a hitch.

'No dice,' she said, giving the standard Tashwari refusal (or its nearest English equivalent, anyway).

The Tashwari shrugged. 'Up yours, then,' he said, formally.

The transaction concluded. Ash turned away from the stall. There were hundreds more like this, naturally. The Xan Burrosa Hea market was a couple of telejet stops away from the outskirts of the university, and the clientele was almost exclusively human. When the first pioneers had surveyed Dellah, the Tashwari had immediately set about convincing the explorers that they were a deeply profound and mystical people. Middle-class humanforms always liked to believe that Native Americans and Tibetan monks had more 'real' and 'spiritual' belief systems than they did; similarly, the humans were more than willing to believe the Tashwari knew the deeper secrets of the universe, simply because they were alien and hadn't ever bothered inventing the video recorder.

Every new term, the freshmen of St Oscar's would flock to Xan Burrosa, hearing tales of this strange, exotic place where mysterious hooded traders dealt in the spoils of Lost Civilizations™. The archaeology students were the worst. They'd descend on the market like locusts with bad complexions, hauling rucksacks full of 'artefacts' back to the university, where they'd proudly display their finds in front of their tutors and promptly get laughed at. Not wanting to face this kind of humiliation, most of these students would pretend they'd known the relics to be fakes all along, and claimed they'd bought them only 'for a joke'. Just to make sure everyone understood this, they'd return to the market week after week, buying more of the ersatz items and insisting such things had 'a kind of kitsch splendour'. Thus their humiliation was turned into an exercise in postmodernism.

Meanwhile, the Tashwari traders were laughing their little polymorpheline socks off.

Ash scanned the crowd, eventually catching sight of a duffle-coat-coloured blur among the rucksacks and

fluorescent T-shirts. As Ash wandered towards it, the shape resolved itself into something scrawny and female.

‘Urn,’ Lucretia was saying. ‘Urn. I don’t remember ever reading anything about Tyler’s Folly. Are you sure?’

Lucretia was, as always, wrapped up in her big black duffle-coat, the lapels folded tightly together at the front. The duffle-coat rarely came off. Most people, in Ash’s experience, thought of Lucretia as a bundle of black fluff with a pair of trainers at the bottom and a freckled head at the top. Lucretia was one of the least secure individuals Ash had ever encountered, and she seemed to think the coat could hold off everything from social embarrassment to thermonuclear attack.

The stall in front of Lucretia was covered in chunks of rock. Another trap designed to snare the unwary student: even alien rocks were supposed to be in some way more interesting than common-or-garden ‘human’ rocks, presumably because there was a microscopic chance of their containing microscopic fossils of microscopic life forms.

‘Abs’lutely,’ said the individual behind the hovva-counter. Surprisingly, he was humanoid, not a Tashwari. ‘Planet hasn’t been surveyed by Earth Central in a hundred years. Too many-political complications, yeah? Lot of quakes on the Folly. All kinds of stuff gets spewed out the ground. That sample you’re holding there, say. See that fossil?’

Ash drew up behind Lucretia and peered over her shoulder. A dull black lump of ore sat in the palm of her hand. There was a small indentation in the substance, and curled up inside it was the calcified form of something wholly disgusting.

‘Mmm,’ said Lucretia, shrewdly.

‘Got fished out the ocean, right after one of the big quakes. No scientist this side of Earth’s been able to make head or tail of it. Fossil’s billions of years old, not like any other life form anywhere else in the galaxy.’

‘Scampi,’ said Ash.

The stallholder looked up at her. The man was young, covered in designer stubble that looked like it had been

inserted with a particularly unreliable follicle pen. He was dressed like a pantomime gypsy. 'Come 'gain?' he said.

'That fossil. It's a shrimp. Look at it. You can tell.'

'Ha,' replied the trader, forcing a grin. 'Joking, yeah? Shrimps don't have that many eyes.'

'They do if you felt-tip them on.' Ash took the rock out of Lucretia's hand. 'Look, if you're going to try and make a fossil, at least do it properly. Can't you afford a home cloning kit or anything? This thing's about as convincing as an archaeopteryx.'

'A what?' asked Lucretia.

'Archacopteryx. Great twentieth-century hoax. Someone pressed a bunch of pigeon-bones into a slab of putty and claimed they'd discovered a dinosaur with feathers. Wasn't found out until the twenty-second century, either.'

Ash put the rock back on to the hovva-counter. Lucretia purposefully trod on her foot. Another of Lucretia's defining neuroses: she wasn't exactly polite, as such, she just had a terrible fear of being embarrassed.

'Right,' said the stallholder, grimly. 'Right. OK. You don't like that? Maybe this'll be more up your alley.' He said 'up your alley' as if it were a threat, then reached into a cardboard box that sulked beneath the hovva-counter and shifted aside the various absurdly coloured minerals that had been piled into it. As Ash watched, he produced another lump of rock, which -

No. It wasn't a rock. It looked more like glass. That confused Ash for a second, as glass typically came in sheets, not chunks. It sat smugly in the trader's hands, a jagged blob of white-ish semitransparent material, maybe thirty centimetres in length. The surface was irregular, but crystal-smooth. It reminded Ash of something, though she couldn't immediately say what.

'Kryptonite,' said Lucretia, helpfully.

'Oh yeah,' said Ash.

'See?' said the trader. 'My, erm, kinsmen got this out the ocean on the Folly, too. What could it be, d'you think? A previously unknown element with magical healing

properties? A meteorite from some strange other world, carrying the secrets of a lost civilization?’

‘Had enough of lost civilizations,’ said Ash.

‘Let me look,’ said Lucretia, and Ash realized - with some horror - that she had that ‘enchanted’ look, the look you only ever saw on the faces of addictive shoppers. Cautiously, the mock gypsy handed the object over.

‘It’s light,’ Lucretia reported. ‘It feels artificial, but the shape...’ They both squinted into the glass. Towards the centre of the object, the substance became dense enough to stop the sunlight penetrating the core. Clearly, though, there was something stuck in the middle of the lump, frozen into place. It was hard to make out exactly what. Ash was reminded of a fly caught in amber, but it’d have to be a bloody big fly.

‘What is it?’ Ash asked the trader. He shrugged.

‘Who can say? Secrets of the artefact aren’t for me to reveal.’

‘You mean you couldn’t break it open?’

‘Erm, well...’

‘It’s brilliant,’ breathed Lucretia. Yup. ‘Enchanted’.

‘It’s expensive,’ warned Ash, ignoring the psychic daggers the trader was throwing at her. ‘He had it under the counter. That means, it’s his special showpiece for today. He waits until someone shows an interest in the fakes, then whips it out and says it’s a special collector’s piece. So he’s going to charge the planet for it.’

‘Twenty-six shillings,’ the man said, levelly.

‘I’ll take it,’ said Lucretia.

Ash tried to snort in derision, but only succeeded in swallowing a load of snot. ‘Twenty-six? That’s your bar budget for the next two months. Isn’t this taking post-modernism a bit too far? We only came here looking for old pulpzines. I still need *Mr Misnomer and the Fiend Without a Future* to complete the set.’

‘You came here looking for old pulpzines,’ Lucretia corrected her. ‘I said, I’ll take it.’

Excuse me,’ said an entirely unfamiliar voice.

Everybody jumped. Nobody was quite sure why, though. The market was full of noise, from the traders advertising their wares at the tops of their voices to the gentle sounds of medical students clamouring to get to the front of the xenopomography stall. There was no reason for the voice to have been so alarming. It just seemed to have crept into the conversation from out of nowhere. If slugs could talk, thought Ash, this is how they'd sound.

She turned. Behind Lucretia stood a man who appeared to be of pure human extraction. He was in his fifties, age-reducing drugs notwithstanding, and his head was bald, white crinkle-cut skin stretched across a grim, humourless skull (not that skulls tended to be hilarious, Ash reminded herself). A serpentine tongue licked the lips of a wide, thin mouth. The individual wore a leather overcoat, while his right hand was hooked around a silver-headed walking cane. Pale blue eyes peered out from behind wire-rimmed spectacles.

If this man turned up at your front door one night, thought Ash, you'd expect a bolt of lightning right after he said 'good evening'.

'I couldn't help overhearing,' he rasped, in an accent Ash couldn't quite place. 'May I inspect the artefact?'

Lucretia opened her mouth to say something, but the chunk of glass stuff was already in the newcomer's hands, the cane tucked under his arm.

'Yes,' he muttered to himself. 'Yes. Exactly as we suspected.' Ash concentrated on the accent, but the more she listened to his voice, the itchier it made her feel. European, possibly?

Abruptly, the man looked up. 'Two hundred shillings,' he hissed.

The trader gawped for a second or two. 'Two hundred? For the one item, yeah?'

'Hang on -' said Lucretia.

'Two hundred,' repeated the man in the trenchcoat.

'That's not fair,' whined Lucretia. 'We got here first.'

The trader cleared his throat, as politely as he could. 'Sorry. Business is business. Law of the jungle, law of economics, and all that. Y'know?'

'I'm going to sulk for a very, very long time,' muttered Lucretia.

'Right,' said the stallholder, sounding a good deal cheerier than he had done before. 'Right. OK. In that case, that'll be, er... two hundred shillings, then.' He held out his hand.

There was an awkward pause.

'Ahhhh,' said the bald man.

The awkward pause returned, with a vengeance.

'I'm a bit short at the moment,' the bald man explained.

'How much short, exactly?' asked Ash, maliciously raising an eyebrow.

The man breathed heavily at her. He sounded like one of those serial killers from the old slasher movies, the ones you could hear hiding in the undergrowth just because of their asthma. 'I don't possess any of your local currency,' he admitted. 'However, you have my word as an officer that you shall be repaid in due course.'

'An officer of what ?' asked Lucretia, but everyone ignored her.

The stallholder nodded sagely. 'Up yours, then,' he said, adopting the local Tashwari custom.

'Hah,' said Lucretia. She snatched the glass-rock thing back, and passed it to Ash.

'You don't understand,' breathed the man, slipping the cane back into his hand and straightening his back. Military posturing. Ash noted. 'It is vital that I have that... that artefact. If you require more assurance -'

Lucretia was already reaching into her dufflecoat for her money pouch, picking the five-shilling pieces out of the lining. 'I was here first,' she smirked. 'And I've got the money. So there. Nyaah.'

The bald man fumed at her, trying to fix her with an icy, soulless gaze. Lucretia dropped the money into the stallholder's hand.

'Nice to do business with you,' the trader said.

‘And up yours,’ said Ash, pleasantly.

The two students faded into the crowd. Behind his hovva-counter, the trader shrugged apologetically at the man in the leather coat, then turned his attention to a nearby cluster of medical students and tried to lure them towards his stall with a lump of silicrete that looked amusingly like a penis.

The man in the leather coat hardly noticed. His eyes were fixed on the back of the girl who’d bought the artefact. His knuckles tightened around the head of his cane, and he muttered sibilant obscenities in a German accent.

The telephone rang. Professor Bernice Summerfield responded to this challenge by falling out of bed.

The ringing continued as she lay face down on the carpet. Bernice decided to deal with the situation by pretending to be a robot. She imagined she had an autoanalysis system, and sent diagnostic software out into her cybernetic bloodstream to identify the problems she was having with her environment-identification subroutines. The software reported back to her neural net, telling her the glitches were caused by an unknown chemical agent. She wondered whether the agent in question might have been alcohol, but decided against it. The Bernice T-3000 All-Purpose Combat Machine had been specially designed to be alcohol-immune, after a series of unfortunate accidents with the T-2000.

The Summerfield robot sent out a probe unit to scout this strange new world. The probe crawled across the rough, carpet-like terrain, pulling itself along by its fingernails. Ultimately, it came to a halt, and the sensory systems installed in its fingertips informed the neural net that they were suspended in a puddle of what felt like human vomit.

Vomit! How weak these biological units were. Bernice T-3000 cross-referenced this information with her cultural databanks, and finally calculated her current location. This was the Anthropology Department. There’d been a party here, the previous night, so the area was bound to be scattered with incapacitated biological units (Student-1000s, mainly,

well known for their weak resistance to ethanol-based warfare) and treacherous areas of stained carpet.

But why was she, a Tutor model of the 3000 series, here? Could she really have been lured to such a place, in spite of her own survival protocols? Had the S-1000s developed some devious new chemical weapon capable of rendering her immobile? Indeed, could such a weapon even have nullified the circuits that enforced Asimov's Four Laws of Robotics, including die one about not getting off with anthropology students?

The ringing went on. Bernice decided to stop pissing about and answer the phone.

The telephone was a classy antique C21 audio-only unit, bolted to the wall of the bedroom and hooked into the university's communications network. Bernice had to crawl over several blurry mounds to reach it, and learnt from the crunching, squelching sounds that they were all people. Finally, she knocked the receiver from its perch and let it dangle. She collapsed against the wall in a precise and controlled manner, so her mouth ended up reasonably close to the speaker.

'Nkh?' she said.

'Professor Summerfield?' the voice at the other end of the line said. Bernice tried to place it. Cultured, but soulless. Synthetic, certainly.

Ah yes. Joseph.

'Shnt'z mf,' affirmed Bernice.

'There's a call for you in your apartment,' the porter told her. 'From the Neuroseismology Department, I believe. Would you like me to reroute it to your current locale?'

Bernice nodded, for no good reason. 'Yyr dm shnt. Rr, Jrssph?'

'Yes, Professor Summerfield?'

'Hmf dyg ggw knrr m wrrs rmph?'

'Tracing you wasn't difficult, Professor. I'm putting you through now.' There was a clicking at the other end of the line. 'Oh, and Professor?'

'Nkh?'

'You have something in your mouth. I'd hazard that it's the residue from a bottle of Burnitser-Holtz. The '42, probably. I suggest you remove it before attempting to speak with another human being.'

Bernice spat. A large piece of black phlegm popped out of her mouth and on to the carpet. They said you could always tell a good Burnitser by the darkness of your spit the morning after, so she guessed it had been a good night.

'Professor Summerfield?' a new voice crackled in her ear.

'Nkh?' said Bernice. 'Mmmf. Hang on. I'm trying to remember how to talk. Ahhhg. Yes?'

'My name's Ash Juliandis,' the voice said. 'Remember me? We met last week. Your lecture on Martian Subterranean Culture. You lent me that pamphlet. *The Truth Lies Downwards*.'

Last week? Goodness, the girl was asking her to remember a lot. 'Oh yes,' Bernice muttered.

'There's something I thought you might like to look at.' There was a pause. 'No, that's not true. There's something I'd like you to look at, but it's kind of interesting, so I thought I'd lie and pretend it's in your field.'

Bernice was only half listening. She decided the blob of black spittle on the carpet was the ugliest thing she'd ever seen, and she started looking around for something to wipe it up with. 'What kind of something?'

'An artefact. From the Xan Burrosa... shit. Shouldn't have told you that.'

'From the Xan Burrosa flea market? Let me guess. You've found another Spear of Tuburr. Congratulations. You're the fifth this year.'

'No. It's not Martian. Listen, I know the market's full of trash, but it's... it's different this time. We ran an Osgood-DeBono test on the thing. The test says it's genuine.'

'Genuine? How genuine?'

'It scored three point four Facts on the Realometer.'

'Mmm. That is genuine.' Bernice spied her bag tucked under a nearby chair, and dragged it towards her. There were a few sheaves of paper in one of the compartments, so she

picked one at random and started wiping the spittle up with it.

‘Basically, we told our faculty about it, and they said they didn’t want anything to do with it. They told us to get on to Archaeology. Can you come over here, d’you think? We’re in the workroom.’

Bernice finished mopping up the goo. ‘Might take me a while to get over there. I’m on the outskirts.’

‘Oh yeah. Anthropology. Your porter said. How was the party?’

‘Absolutely no idea. As I’m currently in someone’s bedroom with a dozen or so comatose adolescents, I’m guessing that either everyone collapsed spontaneously or there was some kind of mass orgy. What do you think?’

‘The last one sounds most interesting, so the first one’s probably true.’

‘Cynic,’ said Bernice. ‘All right. I’ll see you later.’

The phone went dead. Bernice considered putting the receiver back in place, but it was all too much bother, really.

Ash Juliandis. Wait a minute, it was coming back now. Cropped hair, wore shorts that’d been made for military training exercises. The kind of girl who’d probably have lots of piercings in unusual places. She’d come to that Martian lecture, even though she wasn’t attached to Archaeology. They’d talked, afterwards; Ash had seemed interesting, but had some fairly odd ideas, as you’d expect from someone in Neuroseismology. Wasn’t she studying some bizarre kind of literature or other? Something about pulpzines from the 2530s...?

That was it. Ash had given her a copy of a paper she’d written last term, hoping it would explain her interest in Martian archetypes. Bernice hadn’t read it, naturally. She’d stuffed it into her bag -

She grimaced, and gingerly picked up the piece of paper she’d used to mop up her spit. She cast her eyes over the spattered page, squinting at the letters until they started making sense. She found herself looking at a page from a thirties-style adventure story, all heroic action, rippling

muscles, and villainous doomsday devices. The extract came from a work called *Mr Misnomer and the Thousand-Fathom Horror*, which said it all, really.

Bernice spent the next few minutes looking through the other sheets of paper in her satchel. The crux of Ash's thesis, she deduced, was how the pulpzines of the 2530s reflected a pre-war sexual tension also found in the literature of Earth during the rise of the Third Reich and in the popular culture of Magellani Minimata shortly before the Second Boundary Crisis blah de blah de blah. Bernice thought about that for a bit, trying to figure out whether it was really quite clever or just psychoanalytic piffle. In the end, she realized she didn't care. Anybody who could write a serious treatise on thirties pulp literature had to be worth talking to, she decided. Now, what was the best way to reactivate her legs?

'Garg,' said the shape that shambled into the workroom of the Neuroseismology Department.

Ash watched it stumble over to the coffee machine in the corner. The machine's supersensitive casing made a note of the shape's palmprint, checked its ID, checked its credit rating, then let a cup of coffee plop out of its service hatch. The shape downed the cup in one, then slapped the machine again and restarted the whole process. After the fourth cup, the shape began to take on recognizable human characteristics.

'Hello, Professor,' said Ash.

'Bugger,' growled Professor Summerfield. 'What are they putting in Burnitser-Holtz these days?'

'If you've come from Anthropology, it's probably something psychotropic,' suggested Lucretia. 'They've been studying the effects of memory toxins on the evolved primate neurosystem. They advertised for guinea pigs, but no one wanted to know.'

'A-ha. Then their reasons for inviting a respected pillar of the university such as myself to their party may not have been entirely the result of my obvious sexual charms, as I suspected. Sorry, do I know you? Everyone looks kiwi-shaped this morning.'

She was addressing Lucretia, who sat on one of the worktops, still wrapped up in her dufflecoat. The workroom was halfway between being a room and a hall, lined with regular arrays of benches and worktops. Of all the areas in the department building, this was the one that looked most like it might actually be part of an educational establishment. For this reason, the students had reacted against it by furnishing it with a coffee machine and several pieces of hi-tec equipment that did nothing except make interesting noises.

‘Lucretia. Lucretia Scannon. Don’t worry, I really do look kiwi-shaped. It’s the coat.’

‘Good. And you’re Ash. I can tell by the earrings. Where’s the infamous artefact?’

Ash indicated one of the worktops. A medium-duty laser cutter had been set up there, a heavy microscope-shaped object borrowed from one of the practical science labs. Beneath the nozzle of the cutter were the two halves of the glass-rock, surrounded by a thick layer of dust, where the cutler had sliced through the material to get at the mystery object inside. Ash gave the professor a brief rundown of the events at the market.

‘We don’t know what that substance is,’ she concluded. ‘It looks like glass, but it’s got more in common with plastic. We got a couple of molecular physics students to go over it, but they didn’t have a clue. One of them tried to cop off with me, though.’

‘A mystery rock,’ said the professor. ‘Fascinating, but hardly my forte.’

‘It’s what we found inside it that’s interesting. See for yourself.’ At Ash’s behest, the professor stumbled over to the worktop, and squinted at the artefact lying to one side of the cutter.

It was a book, roughly speaking. The cover was made out of leather, the kind that makes things seem old even when they’re brand-new. The pages looked as though they were falling over themselves to escape the binding. Even without opening it, you could tell the paper was yellowed with age.

The professor gingerly picked it up. Ash looked over her shoulder as she started to browse. It was a pocket-sized volume, and the writing was tiny, in many places blurred beyond legibility. Whole sections of text had been washed away by water damage, while other pages were tattered and torn, missing paragraphs. The professor peered at the pages. “And... should I never return...” blah blah blah... something about woolly mammoths... “centre of the world... hope this journal will somehow...” She paused. ‘Is that “find”? Oh, I see. ‘This journal will somehow find...” something something “surface”.’

Then she saw it. Ash could tell she’d seen it, because the professor’s muscles went tense all along her arms.

“...will never believe that I, Meister Kryptosa, should find such a place”,’ said Ash, reading aloud.

‘Kryptosa?’ The professor shook her head. ‘No, this is stupid. He never came anywhere near this part of the universe. Did he?’

‘That’s what I thought,’ said Ash. ‘I read some of his books, when I was in Nth-form college. *In Search of Ancient Mu, A Short Trip to the Centre of Creation*, that kind of thing.’

‘Am I supposed to be taking notes here?’ asked Lucretia.

The professor looked up at her. ‘Kryptosa was supposed to be a Meister of Natural Sciences at New Heidelberg, but he liked to call himself an adventurer. Took his lead from the early colonial scientist-explorers, like Joss McFinney and Gustav Umst. He used to get vidcast companies to sponsor his expeditions. Made a lot of twenty-six-part documentary serials about his quests to find the lost cities of the ancient races.’ She sucked her lower lip. ‘Thing is, Kryptosa was very good at his job. He managed to find most of the lost cities he went looking for, and recorded the discoveries for vidcast. Most other scholars hated him, predictably. Kryptosa vanished more than a century ago, though. The last anyone ever heard of him. he said he was going on a research trip to an uncharted region of the galaxy... ah. I think I see where this is going.’

'The man who sold us the rock said this book came out of the ocean on Tyler's Folly,' said Ash. 'There've been a whole bunch of earthquakes there, the last few months. We checked.'

'I checked,' Lucretia pointed out.

'What, exactly, are you saying?' asked the professor, slowly. Ash guessed the memory toxin was still taking its toll, and the woman was trying to put the world together piece by piece.

'It's the story of Kryptosa's last expedition. And you know what it looks like he found, don't you?'

'An entire subterranean environment,' said the professor.

'Right,' said Ash.

'Under the surface of Tyler's Folly,' said the professor.

'Right,' said Ash.

'With woolly mammoths in it,' said the professor.

'Right,' said Ash.

'They must have seen you coming,' said the professor.

'What?' said Ash.

'It's the stupidest tiling I've ever heard. I mean, admittedly, it's stupid in a way that's very, very appealing, but that doesn't stop it being fundamentally stupid. This is poo. It's got to be a joke.'

'And if it isn't?' said Lucretia.

Everyone turned to face her.

'Sorry,' she mumbled. 'Seemed like the right thing to say.'

Ash took the book out of the professor's hands. 'Look, I don't seriously believe any of this is true. What I'm saying is, someone's gone to all the trouble of putting this book together. It's a fake good enough to fool an Osgood-DeBono test. You remember what I said after your lecture, about neurochthonian archetypes?'

'Oh, yes,' replied the professor. Ash had the sneaking suspicion she was lying.

'This is what neuroseismology's all about. Looking at the way a certain idea can shake people's heads apart. That's why I'm studying thirties pulp literature, because it's where so many of the ideas come from that shape modern vid-

culture. There hasn't been an adventure movie made in the last half-century that wasn't influenced by the Mr Misnomer chronicles. The point is, someone's trying to shake us up with this Kryptosa idea, and I want to know why. It's ideal research material, right?'

The professor nodded. Slowly, though, not wanting to damage any loose components inside her skull. 'All right, I'll go along with you. But I want to see the test results.'

Ash looked at Lucretia. Lucretia nodded. 'They're on my research scratchpad,' she said. 'I left it back in our rooms after we'd been to the science lab.' She hopped off the worktop and went to fetch it.

Ash turned back to the professor. The older woman had opened the book again, and was trying to decipher a page that looked like it had been scorched at the edges.

"The mountains... two tribes... Gugs, and... of Lilith... beware MEPH..."

The professor looked up, and frowned.

"Beware MEPH"?' she queried.

The moment Lucretia opened the door of her quarters, she knew something was wrong. She didn't know what. There was just that feeling, that terrible sensation of *wrongness* human beings get when the natural order of things is disturbed. It got worse when she stepped into the bedroom. Not bad enough to be worth mentioning to anyone, mind you, not bad enough to actually be definable, but on the other hand...

She looked around the room, trying to find some reason to justify the anxiety. There wasn't one. Somehow, she never got around to justifying her anxieties. She had the horrible feeling that if she ever did, they'd stop being anxieties, and she'd have to go away and start being happy or something. The furniture hadn't been moved. The bed was unmade, as it had been when she'd left that morning, but aside from that, all the signs of an obsessive/compulsive personality were in evidence. On her desk, the posable mirror was at an angle of

exactly forty-five degrees, while a number of half-written essays were folded into a neat stack beneath the power lamp.

Or were they? Was that the way she'd left them? Hadn't she left the top sheet of paper face down, instead of face up? And the lampshade, hanging from the ceiling... Had it been tilted slightly, disturbed in some subtle way she couldn't quite place? In fact, was that the same sheet she remembered leaving on the bed that morning? The same sweat-stained T-shirt? Was it the same bed, even? Had somebody been here? Had they searched the room? Replaced everything with an almost-but-not-quite-identical copy? Come to think of it, was the room the same shape it had been, or...?

Appropriately, it was at this precise moment of world-consuming angst that a dark-clad figure stepped out from behind the door and planted a leather glove over Lucretia's mouth. If the glove hadn't been covered in ether, she probably would have passed out anyway.

'THE TRAVELLERS FROM BEYOND INFINITY!'

[Mr Misnomer and the Thousand-Fathom Horror, extract XX99, accompanying thesis 'Psychotectonic Imagery in '30s Neo-Pulp Adventure Fiction', endnotes by Ash Juliandis. Original text copyright 2533, Melbourne Autolit Services, QISBN 0426-20512-X. I

...but too late! For the neural vibrowhisk had already been set in motion, and it descended upon Mr Misnomer's head like some glinting, whirring Sword of Damocles.¹ Doctor Harbinger's insane robotic henchmen dragged the dauntless Binky Sharperton away from the control console, their evil pincers clamping his arms before he could pull the lever that would release Mr Misnomer from bondage.²

'Ssstruggle all you will!' cawed Dr Harbinger, the light reflecting wickedly from his polished bronze face mask as he hunched over the whirring gears of the Torment Machine. 'The resstraintsss that bind you to thisss devicce are sssolid titanium! Even your musssculature ssshall not break them!'³

'I'm not trying to break them, Harbinger!' quoth Mr Misnomer. And, yes, he had indeed ceased his battle against the Machine's icy grasp. Beneath his taut leather vest, his muscles - the same bronzed pectorals that had earned him his legendary nickname, 'The Man of Chrome' - no longer flexed manfully.⁴ For he had not been idle whilst his companion, the dauntless Binky Sharperton, was attempting to free him! No, Mr Misnomer had taken advantage of the distraction, slipping his electro-jemmy from the lining of his

left gauntlet and levering it into the locking mechanism of the Machine's restraints...

1. Reference to Syracusan myth. Ancient mythic imagery is common in many of the Melbourne Autolit pulps of the 2530s, q.v. traces of Arthurian folklore in XX86 and allusions to Krazy Kat in XX73. Such references may have been intended to lend weight to a 'lo-kulture' form of literature.
2. First overt references to 'bondage' in the Mr Misnomer chronicles. In the puritanical '30s, sexual fetishism was rife in the pulps. Fantasy was the only genre in which sadomasochistic imagery was thought to be acceptable. See also XX45, 'No! No! Not the Pleasure-Prods!'
3. 2538 saw the first pro-Martian guerrilla activity since the Olympian era, and it's surely no coincidence that the villainous Dr Harbinger develops a 'Martian lisp' at this time. In the mid-2540s, during the Sixth Generation National Socialist rallies in the Stella Stora colonies, the Doctor (or 'Doktor') suddenly acquires a German accent.
4. Again, fetishistic imagery. Mr Misnomer wears tight black leather, while Dr Harbinger's human henchmen (most of whom die horribly in XX92) wear rubber uniforms. There are definite homoerotic overtones to these passages, and we should examine them closely to uncover their full psychotectonic value. [And not just because they make Ash get all wet and stupid. – LSJ]

Strictly speaking, the vessel could have arrived anywhere. Its designers had enough experience in interstitial travel to make the whole idea seem terribly dull to them, and the craft would have had no trouble tearing open a quantum passageway directly between its homeworld and its destination, despite the fact that the homeworld was seventeen galaxies and a googolplex of light years away.

It could have done. But it didn't. The People hated cutting corners, and never missed the opportunity to do things the hard way. They felt it gave them character.

Thus, the vacuum bathosphere popped into existence in an empty stretch of space at the tedious end of Cygnus Mortis, its engines licking the wounds of the space-time continuum in its wake. Of course, there was no real 'up' or 'down' in space, but the People had a finely honed sense of aesthetics; hence, no sooner had the bathosphere appeared than it began spinning through the void in a manner that could only be described as 'falling'.

It was a small vessel, little more than an ornate brass sphere, eight metres or so in diameter. Any human physicist observing it would have been surprised - nay, horrified - to see that the framework was held together with large bronze rivets, which shouldn't technically have been able to withstand the rigours of interstellar travel. And as for the little glass portholes...

The bulkhead door ground open obligingly, the scent of varnish and electricity wafting into the airlock around Fos!ca. So far. she'd spent most of her time in the airlock, checking the seals on the doors. 'Checking the seals' was a euphemism for 'staying as far away from !X as possible', of course.

The control section took up most of the space inside the bathosphere. Opposite the bulkhead door, the traditional control and display units were lined up against the curved exterior wall, a row of polished wooden panels inset with a variety of brass-framed dials and shiny metal levers. The exterior wall itself was also brass, inlaid with black rubber cables and interrupted only by the forward porthole. Like all the portholes on the ship, it was nothing more than a pane of glass, held in place by sundry gravitational forces which God had assured Fos!ca couldn't possibly malfunction. The forward porthole was larger than the rest, a good two metres in diameter. The stars rolled sickeningly around the glass as the bathosphere tumbled towards the tail of Cygnus Mortis.

There were two seats attached to the floor of the control section, both covered in a tacky black substance that apparently simulated the dried skin of an extinct mammalian

quadruped. Seatbelts had thoughtfully been provided. !X was folded into his chair, exactly where he'd been since they'd left the worldsphere. From the doorway, Fos!ca could see only the top of his head. Pale, hairless and clammy. It reminded her of the kind of plastic they used to make ugly lawn furniture.

!X didn't move, didn't speak. In the textbooks Fos!ca had read on neurotic/psychotic behaviour, the mentally deranged would talk their mouths off. According to the literature - most of it hailing from alien barbarian cultures, admittedly, as the People had less than their fair share of sociopaths - distressed individuals were known for their evil schemes and diabolical intentions, which they usually liked to discuss at length. Fos!ca was prepared for that. She'd spent weeks researching every possible threat, and rehearsing all the Do[EO]C's suggested responses.

But !X didn't speak. Fos!ca had the terrible feeling that if he was going to attack her, he was going to do it without any warning. She imagined him springing out of his chair, jumping at her throat. She imagined the horrible silence of the control section being broken by a sudden, unexpected flash of blood and horror. The feeling was utterly alien to her.

!X remained silent as the door rumbled shut behind her. The silence was the worst thing, thought Fos!ca. Say something, please. Sneer at me. Promise to kill me at the nearest opportunity. Anything, as long as I can understand it.

'Are we nearly there yet?' Fos!ca heard herself say. She knew it was the stupidest question imaginable, but she had to break the silence somehow.

It didn't help. !X didn't reply. The silence was back, it was back and she was going to choke on it before he even managed to get his hands around her neck and -

'No,' said !X. 'Is there a problem?'

Fos!ca was so relieved, she felt like screaming.

'There's no problem,' she babbled. 'No problem there's no problem there's no problem no. No.'

'I wanted to ask you something,' said !X.

Fos!ca nodded like a mad thing. Yes, yes, ask me something. Please.

‘Why are you so anxious?’

Because you’re alien, Fos!ca wanted to say. It’s not supposed to feel this way. I was so excited, when the Do[EO]C told me I’d be the one escorting you. Excited, right up until the point when I stepped into Paradise. I’m supposed to be a professional; I’m supposed to be familiar with every form of mental disorder; I’ve read all the texts and seen all the reconstructions; but I don’t understand you at all, and I just want to go home.

‘Gagh,’ Fos!ca said.

Then the silence came back, and things got much, much worse.

The rock was the colour of pitch, and was doing its best to tear holes in Bernice’s breeches. She waited until she reached the top of the mound before bothering to look up. The sky was grey, a particularly sad and ugly kind of grey, the ocean matching it perfectly. To the north, on the horizon, she could see the coast of Port Lindenbrook, while in every other direction there were smaller islands, little black scabs poking petulantly out of the sea. The only sound was the roar of the sea, the ocean spitting gobbets of salt water into the wind.

‘This planet sucks,’ said Bernice. The statement was entirely out of character, but it was the only description of Tyler’s Folly that really hit the mark.

It had been a week since she’d first seen the book. Or, to put it in more humanistic terms, it had been a week since Lucretia had vanished. The girl had never returned to the Neuroseismology Department workroom. Ash had gone looking for her, but there’d been no clue to her whereabouts, nary a hint of dufflecoat.

Bernice remembered the call Ash had made to Campus Security. The Goll who’d been manning the desk that day had brushed the matter aside. Students, he’d pointed out, vanished all the time. Most of them ended up naked and

handcuffed to lampposts on the *Rue de Excession*, or were found in gutters clutching traffic cones. This had made Ash very angry. She'd insisted something had changed in Lucretia's room, as if the place had been meticulously taken apart and meticulously put back together again. Needless to say, the Goll hadn't been impressed by this evidence.

That night, Ash and Bernice had got terribly drunk together.

'Somebody wanted that book,' Ash had said, while crouching on the door of Bernice's study, looking for something she'd dropped but no longer remembering exactly what. 'Somebody knew it was inside that rock thing, and searched Lucretia's room for it. When she came back, they musht have kidnapped her.'

'“Musht”?’ Bernice had queried.

'What?'

'You said “musht”.'

'No I didn't. Drunk people don't really slur words like that. It's a popular fallacy.' The word 'fallacy' had sounded very rude indeed, so they'd giggled stupidly for a while.

'So tell me this,' Bernice had burbled. 'Why would anyone follow a student, search her rooms, kidnap her, and then vanish without trace in order to get hold of a book which is on the surface of great historical import but which is in fact quite obviously a hoax? Gosh, that was a long sentence.'

'Did I really say “musht”?' Ash had asked.

In the morning, things had all seemed so much clearer. Someone, they'd concluded, was messing them about. They'd gone back to Xan Burrosa together, in search of the rock salesman, but there'd been no sign of him. In the end, there'd been only one lead left to follow.

Bernice had gone to the Head of Archaeology, and asked if the university could arrange for her and Ash to visit Tyler's Folly. Dr Follett, funnily enough, had agreed. He'd be only too glad, he'd said, to give Bernice the time off, provided the trip wasn't paid for out of the university budget. Follett's willingness to arrange things had seemed odd, until Bernice had discovered that the Folly was a notorious trouble spot,

and that there was a good chance any visiting off-worlder would end up stabbed to death in an alley somewhere. Gee, thanks, Doc.

Bernice and Ash had arrived the day before yesterday. A lot of the first day here had been spent at the spaceport, where most of their personal effects had been confiscated - Bernice's Earth-made palmtop computer was a 'possible tool of espionage', apparently - and they'd been supplied with a list of a hundred and three things they absolutely weren't to do while on Tylerkind soil. Bernice had already broken thirty-seven of these rules, including the one about intruding into a priority emergency zone. This morning. Ash had rented a two-man junk from the Port, and the two-woman expedition had set off for McClure's Atoll.

Now Bernice had reached the highest point of that very site, and stood surveying the seascape. The Atoll was a ring of featureless black rock, five hundred metres from side to side. Here at the pinnacle, she was way above sea level, and before her was a sheer slope that led down to the even expanse of water at the centre of the ring. The water was the usual wet-Wednesday-afternoon grey. Even the fish must be bored around here, she thought.

'Ow,' said Ash. 'Bloody ow.'

Bernice looked over her shoulder. Ash was scrambling up the peak behind her, one-handed. The other hand was holding a cheap Thrapanese palmtop, bought from the spaceport at great expense, as a large slice of everything sold to off-worlders here went to the Republican Policeman's Ball fund. Ash was wearing a combat jacket, a bulky army surplus number that would have been excellent camouflage if she'd been, say, fighting in the custard swamps of Entirelyimaginarium VII.

'I thought you said your boots were hydraulically powered,' mused Bernice as Ash struggled to the top of the atoll.

'Yeah, but they weren't made for climbing. They were designed for null-gravity combat. That's what the guy who sold them to me said, anyway. It sounded pretty impressive

at the time.’ Ash shoved the palmtop under Bernice’s nose. ‘See this?’

Bernice examined the readings flickering across the screen. ‘Mmmm, snot-green VDU. Lovely. What do those symbols there mean?’

‘Openings in the rock. The atoll’s covered with ‘em. The analysis software thinks they’re natural, not man-made. Then again, the analysis software was made on Thrapos 3, and is therefore crap.’ Ash palled the pocket of her jacket. ‘According to the journal, Kryptosa found the entrance into the Inner World inside one of the cave tunnels in the atoll. He doesn’t say which one. I mean, the book doesn’t say which one. What’s that noise?’

Bernice cocked her head. Why that should help her hear better, she wasn’t sure, but it worked in novels. There was a thin, reedy buzzing in the air. She squinted towards the north horizon, to see two dart-shaped objects approaching the atoll, from the general direction of Port Lindenbrook. Instinctively, she ducked behind the black rock.

‘Patrol junks,’ she muttered. ‘Republican security. Looking for quake looters on one of the islands, possibly. Maybe we’d better get to work.’

‘What kind of work did you have in mind, exactly?’ asked Ash.

‘We go where the journal leads us,’ said Bernice. ‘Down.’

The nearest islet to the atoll was small - so small, in fact, the Republic hadn’t even bothered to raise its flag there. The men manning the patrol junks barely glanced at the rock as they passed it by, instead navigating a course towards the inhabited islands off on the southern horizon.

Hence they completely failed to notice the leather-clad individual standing on that tiny islet, an individual whose attention was fixed on the two oddly dressed figures he’d seen ducking behind the highest peak of the atoll.

‘We’re close,’ said !X. ‘We’ll be entering the planet’s gravity well in a few moments.’

Fos!ca was strapped into her seat now, keeping a close eye on !X as he examined the wooden control panels in front of him. She found herself watching each tiny motion he made, following every twitch of every muscle. Waiting for him to do something dangerous. Something irrational. When he'd leant forward to inspect the controls, the sudden movement had actually made Fos!ca yelp. Thankfully, !X had ignored her.

'The planet's inside our scanning field,' !X went on. 'There are fluctuations in its geospheric and gravitational patterns. Mostly in the eastern hemisphere.' He started flicking the brass switches, cranking the big rubber-handled levers. 'I'm setting course for the largest of the anomalous regions. These are the areas... your God... was most interested in.'

Fos!ca looked up at the porthole. She saw dim, half-lit shapes rushing past, and guessed the bathosphere was passing by the outer satellites of the system. How fast were they travelling? Slower than light speed, now, but still millions of kilometres an hour. What if they hit the planet? What if !X deliberately crashed the vessel, killing them both? He had no logical reason to, hut then, he didn't need reasons, because he was -

Because he needed therapy.

And there was a whole alien society down on the planet, stranger even than Paradise. How was !X going to react, being around so many people, so many *real* people? Come to think of it, how was Fos!ca?

'Tyler's Folly is a low-level post-nuclear society with an unstable military hierarchy,' Fos!ca said, primly. The words came straight from a textbook, and tumbled out of her mouth without much prompting. 'The natives are likely to be aggressive and territorial. We need to plan a contact strategy.'

!X didn't take his eyes off the controls. 'We're not going to be talking to them,' he said.

That threw Fos!ca. 'But surely... if we're going to investigate the anomalies... some kind of communication with the local population would be useful.. .'

'The anomaly is underwater, according to the scanning field. There will be no involvement with the local population.'

‘But if there is -’

‘Then we kill them,’ said !X.

Fos!ca tried to respond, really she tried, but her mouth had wedged itself open and her tongue wouldn’t work. She wanted to tell !X he was mad... no. She wanted to tell him there was no need, to explain how the application of simple personological techniques would be enough to deal with any hostile native life forms, how the Do[EO]C had protocols to cover this kind of thing.

‘Doesn’t it strike you as odd,’ !X went on, ‘that God, who always agreed I should never be released from Paradise, would decide to set me free now?’

No, Fos!ca imagined herself saying. It was the Do[EO]C’s idea to give you temporary release. Not God’s. Really.

‘Rrrrk,’ she actually said.

‘Assuming God wants to investigate affairs in this galaxy, and needs a pawn to do it, why not use the Tiny But Interesting Interest Group? They know this part of the galaxy. They have connections here.’

It’s not like that, Fos!ca imagined herself saying. You’ve got it all wrong.

‘Akkkh,’ she actually said.

“‘You cannot oppose God’s will,’” !X concluded.

As he said it, a pale disc appeared in the centre of the porthole and hurled itself towards the bathosphere. There was a flash of white, a flash of blue. Sparks ignited around the brass framework as the vessel crashed through the atmosphere. Then there was a great grey wall up ahead, a flat expanse marked with strips of jagged black, and in the split second before they hit it, Fos!ca tried to yell at !X to stop the bathosphere. Instead, she ended up screaming.

They hit the wall. There was a muted splash from outside the vessel. The ocean of Tyler’s Folly, not believing anything could have hit it quite so hard, could only gurgle with surprise around them.

The bathosphere stopped. Fos!ca fell forward, but her seatbelt dragged her back into the grip of the chair.

‘We’re here,’ said !X.

Fos!ca looked up. They were beneath the sea, she realized, the waters outside the vessel tinted a nasty grey, tinged with chemicals the Rare and Exotic Pollutants Interest Group would doubtless have found fascinating. The exterior lamps of the bathosphere had been activated, illuminating a number of small, pallid shapes dancing around the brass hull. The framework of the bathosphere made alarming creaking sounds as it accustomed itself to the sudden change in environment.

‘The TBI1G supplied God with biodata from this region,’ said !X, not addressing anyone in particular. ‘From that, God constructed a genetic profile of the environment. According to the scanning field, most of these bioforms don’t match the profile. That suggests most of the marine life outside the bathosphere is alien to this ecosystem. It came from somewhere else, or at least

The bathosphere shook The impact lasted only a second, but the framework continued to vibrate, and there was a dull, throbbing echo through the control section. Fos!ca reached for the catch of her seatbelt, without knowing quite why. The sudden urge to be free, perhaps. As if there was any escape from here.

The ship shook again. And again. Two more hollow impacts. !X unclipped his own belt, then pointed to the porthole.

‘There,’ he said.

Fos!ca followed his finger. She saw something small and sickly drop through the water towards the bathosphere, glaring white in the lamplight, turning to show its underbelly to the porthole. It was some form of shellfish, a horn-shaped body with six tiny crustacean legs.

The shellfish touched the glass of the porthole. The moment it made contact, the shell ruptured. Fos!ca blinked, and thus missed what happened next. The bathosphere shook again. The next time she looked, the creature had gone, and a sticky white stain was smeared across the glass where it had been.

‘Highly pressurized anatomical structure,’ noted !X. ‘Contact with another solid body is enough to breach the integrity of the shell. Gastric gases stored inside the body are released, resulting in a minor explosion.’ He nodded. ‘It may scatter its eggs that way. Why did you scream?’

Fos!ca started. ‘I was scared,’ she blathered.

‘That’s all it takes?’

Then the bathosphere lurched. It didn’t just shake: it lurched. Something pulled at it, tipped it to one side, so quickly the inertial dampers didn’t even have time to kick in. Fos!ca fell out of her chair, and for a moment she was weightless, eyes tight shut, hovering in a kind of nowhere-in-particular that was infinitely preferable to the somewhere-in-specific she’d just been.

Fos!ca opened her eyes again, and found herself looking at a flat black disc, a good metre across. Behind the disc was a solid wall of yellow, broken up by veins of muddy red.

It was an eye. Filling the entirety of the porthole.

‘A giant squid,’ noted !X, quite calmly. ‘Interesting.’

‘THE BEAST FROM BELOW THE WAVES!’

Crack! The titanium restraints snapped open, and Mr Misnomer was on his feet in the time it would take you to say Jack Robinson’. Behind him, the vibrowhisk reached the spot where the Chrome Crusader’s forehead had been, mere moments earlier. The dauntless Binky Sharperton gulped. If his companion and mentor had been two seconds slower, his brain would have been so much guacamole!

‘Ssseize him!’ snarled Dr Harbinger, but the robots had already released the dauntless Binky Sharperton, and were e’en now closing on Harbinger’s escaped nemesis. The first of the diabolical automata raised the electrical tendril to which its miniaturized chronon ray was mounted, but even steel was no match for Mr Misnomer’s legendary right hook. The leather gauntlet pounded the brute machine’s trisilicale face, and sparks Hew from its antennae as it blew a fuse.⁵

‘Behind you!’ yelled the dauntless Binky Sharperton. Mr Misnomer whirled around, the neon light of the laboratory glinting from his proud, bared teeth.⁶ Dr Harbinger had primed his electronic flesh-wrangler, and with a sharp upward motion... *[End extract: cont. XX100]*

5. Passages like this one demonstrate a wilful ignorance of basic cybernetics theory. Oobert Valdeburg (see Bibliography) claims this suggests a dearth of Public Domain robotics data in the 2530s, a theory which is provably untrue. More likely, it indicates a mistrust of technology typical of puritanical ‘back-to-basics’ cultures. Ironical, then, that almost all of Mr Misnomer’s adventures were written by autolit engines. Note also how electronic

menaces such as the Nemesis Doomsday Engine and Dr Harbinger's Megalomanopticon are always fitted with built-in self-destruct mechanisms, against all sense and reason.

6. Atrocious writing aside, this shows the importance placed on primomythic physical attributes in the chronicles. Strong teeth; even stronger jawline; heavy musculature; blond hair (swept back, naturally); piercing grey eyes. This corresponds with the 'psychic faultlines' theory' found within most neurosei

[Thesis incomplete as of last download.]

The darkness was growling at her. Lucretia thought about opening her eyes, then started wondering if there were things on the other side of her eyelids she really didn't want to see. This led to a brief internal debate about whether the 'things' in question could possibly be worse than the 'things' she was imagining. Most of her synapses voted no, so she opened her eyes after all.

There was a face hovering above her. The face was female, framed at the top by a floppy blonde fringe and at either side by girly bunches, as if the woman desperately wanted to look cute but couldn't quite pull it off.

She sulked at her reflection. Her reflection sulked back. Strangely, it was better at sulking than she was. Lucretia tried giving the mirror a V-sign, only to find that her hands were pinned down by her sides, with metal clamps biting into her wrists. She seemed to be lying on a metal slab, the surface gently vibrating in time to the growling. Growling - it had to be an engine, yeah? That meant she was inside some kind of vehicle, yeah?

But how long have I been here?

'Good question,' her reflection answered. 'You've been out of it most of the time. They've been pumping you with tranquillizers, you know?'

OK. So. I've been kidnapped, tranquilized out of my nut, and strapped to some kind of operating table with a mirror over my head. Wait a minute. What's the mirror for?

'They want you to see the look of terror on your own face while they torture you.'

Really?

'Just guessing.'

Lucretia tried to lift her head. Beyond the slab, everything was dark; the only light here came from a small surgical lamp, suspended from the ceiling somewhere on the other side of the mirror. There were (humanoid?) shapes lurking in the darkness, hovering in the gloom on the other side of her toes -

Her toes. She could see her own toes. Her feet were bare. With a mounting sense of dread, Lucretia turned her attention to her own body.

Oh God. Oh God. They'd undressed her. The bastards, they'd undressed her. She was naked. Desperately, she tried to fold her arms across her chest, but the clamps on her hands wouldn't budge. She started thrashing uselessly. Naked. Pigging naked.

'Well, not actually naked,' her reflection pointed out. 'Technically, you're wearing a knee-length hospital robe. And they've let you keep your underwear on.'

But I'm not wearing my dufflecoat. They've taken away my dufflecoat. You don't call that naked?'

The reflection looked dubious.

The planet Sarah-361 was described in the Earth Central planetary gazetteer as 'an eccentric little colony world on the Widdershins March of Earthspace', a description Lucretia would have found appealing if she hadn't been born and raised there. A couple of hundred years ago, Sarah-361 had been ravaged by some genetically engineered plague or other, and the population had been halved almost overnight. The local prytaneium had responded by encouraging the colonists to go into a procreative frenzy. In the following decades, monogamy was turned into a social sin, celibacy was outlawed by a series of increasingly bizarre new statutes,

and pornography was made mandatory in all urban households, in the hope that it would 'encourage sexual thoughts' and cause the colonists to breed like rabbits.

By 2571, the year of Lucretia's spawning, the Repopulation Bureau had drawn up a list of physical characteristics which, according to its research, were found most desirable in human beings. Those members of society who possessed these characteristics were encouraged to breed twice as fast, while those who didn't had the option of either having mugenic enhancement surgery or becoming social lepers.

Right from the start, it was obvious Lucretia was going to have problems. She was blonde, which was, according to her ID profile, the only thing in her favour. Her hip/thigh proportion was entirely off centre; she was found to have no sense of sexual body language; she had precisely the wrong kind of freckles; her pheromone count was twenty-live points short of human normal; and, worst of all, her bust measurement fell well below the expected 36D standard.

Even now, now she'd torn herself away from Sarah-361 and found herself a makeshift home a quarter of a galaxy away, she knew the universe was still watching her, sadly shaking its head at the state of her genestock. Every now and then, just when she thought she was finally getting away from the clutches of the body-censors, life would give her a little reminder of her own mutant DNA. Like last term, when she'd helped Ash with her thesis. Lucretia had fastflicked through the illustrations that accompanied the adventures of Rex Havoc and Mr Misnomer, the images of helpless women tied up and threatened by leather-clad master villains, oozing bags of flesh popping out of their sweaters. I mean, Lucretia had said to herself, it's not like I *want* to be tied up and threatened by leather-clad master villains or anything, but if I *were*...

They'd taken away her dufflecoat. The one thing that stopped people making judgements about any part of her body below her neck.

On the other side of Lucretia's naked, vulnerable toes, one of the shadowy figures stirred. Lucretia heard footsteps.

‘Der subject would seem to be talking to *herself*,’ said a voice. Its accent was thick, European. German?

‘I’m not talking to myself,’ Lucretia and her mirror-image said as one. ‘I’m talking to my reflection. There’s a difference. Give me back my dufflecoat.’

The footsteps stopped. A new face appeared above Lucretia’s head, as someone leant over her, putting himself in front of the mirror. The man was old, his face fat and lined with wrinkles, though the wrinkles were so deep that some of them could have been scars in disguise. He wore a monocle in one eye, and his mouth was covered by a paper surgical facemask.

Lucretia suddenly remembered to be scared.

‘So,’ said the man, although he said it more like ‘zzzho’. ‘Der tranquillizers are wearing off, ja?’

‘Keep her alive,’ said a second voice, from somewhere behind the doctor. ‘Her friends may come looking for her.’

‘Ach! Das ist no problem, Kommander.’ Suddenly, Lucretia found herself looking at the business end of a huge, old-fashioned syringe. ‘Time for night-night, ja?’

Something punctured the skin of Lucretia’s right arm. The last thought she had before losing consciousness was: They wouldn’t have been able to do that if I’d been wearing my dufflecoat.

The bathosphere stopped creaking and started groaning. There were no signs of damage in the control section, but Fos!ca could imagine the brass structure collapsing in on itself, the portholes cracking open. She wasn’t quite sure where these images of disaster were coming from.

‘What’s it doing?’ she asked, moving away from the forward porthole and the eye of the squid. She hoped she sounded as calm and detached as !X did. She didn’t, but she hoped it.

‘Trying to break open the bathosphere,’ answered !X. His hands were playing across the control panels, flicking switches in a sequence that meant very little to Fos!ca. ‘It thinks this vessel is some form of shellfish. It wants the flesh inside.’

‘How do you know that?’

‘Because it’s a predator,’ !X replied, but he didn’t elaborate.

‘It can’t get in,’ Fos!ca insisted. ‘It can’t. The bathosphere’s built for interstitial travel. The squid won’t be able to do any damage.’

‘Not true. The suspensor fields are only designed to withstand specific phenomena. The ship has no defence against this form of attack. The squid’s tentacles are powerful enough to rupture the framework. It’s quite capable of killing us.’

He stopped working at the controls as he said it. Then he stood upright, and stared into the eye of the leviathan, it was as if, in that moment, he’d decided to let the squid kill them both, just to prove a point.

And Fos!ca realized, finally, the truth of it: with the possible exception of Paradise, this was the first time she’d been in a genuine high-risk situation, what the Do[EO]C liked to call ‘physical jeopardy’. The first time she could, theoretically, have died. No God to save her here. No People to find her and regenerate her body. No watchful little drones from the Health and Safety Interest Group.

Then !X leant over the controls again. Suddenly, the forward porthole was covered in blood, clouds of dirty scarlet billowing away in the water. Fos!ca spotted strips of something black and ragged Happening against the glass. The squid’s pupil had exploded. The veins in the corners of its eye pumped blood into the blister that remained, but the fluid was soon carried away by the currents.

The eye moved away from the porthole. Fos!ca glimpsed a huge and rubbery body on the far side of the glass; then the bathosphere started spinning, the creature’s tentacle pushing the vessel away in disgust. This time, the inertia systems were quick enough to compensate.

Fos!ca looked at !X. !X looked back at her. She turned away again as quickly as possible.

‘How?’ she said, flatly.

'The portholes are held in place by the suspensor fields. The fields hold the bathosphere together. I extended them, a little. The ship decided the eye was part of its structure.'

Fos!ca noticed some of the matter from the squid's eye, still stuck to the porthole, it looked as if it had become attached to the glass, integrated on a cellular level.

She didn't say anything else. !X turned his attention back to the wooden consoles, and the world stopped spinning. The porthole was pointing downward now, towards the ocean floor, where something wide and dark was just about visible on the sea bed. Glittering white fish swam around it in elegant formations, occasionally vanishing into its great black body.

'There,' said !X. 'A fissure. A crack in the strata. According to the instruments, its depth is...'

He fell silent. Fos!ca allowed herself a quick glance in his direction. He was staring blankly at the dials. 'Its depth is uncertain,' he concluded. 'This is the centre of the largest anomaly. The instruments are picking up gravitational disturbances inside the fissure. It's difficult reading anything beyond that.'

'That's where God wants us to go?' asked Fos!ca.

!X didn't reply. He simply reached out for the console and tugged a single lever.

Instantly, the darkness of the fissure filled the porthole. The craft plummeted into the crack at a velocity which, though well below the maximum speed of the bathosphere, was still enough to make Fos!ca's hypnoadrenaline system start pumping chemical panic into her blood. The creaking started again, the brass plates of the bathosphere grinding angrily together, as if ready to burst free of each other. There were metallic popping noises from somewhere overhead.

'We're going too fast,' blurted Fos!ca.

'Our velocity is unimportant. I told you. There are unusual gravitational conditions inside the fissure. They're having an adverse effect on the ship's structure.'

'We have to stop!'

'We can't.'

‘What?’ The bathosphere moaned, a single agonized whine that bubbled up from beneath the floor of the control section. There were more popping sounds. A few of the bronze rivets fell from the ceiling and pinged on to the floor. Fos!ca could have sworn she felt a drop of salt water land on her neck.

‘We’re inside a gravity funnel,’ said !X. ‘We wouldn’t be able to break free of it even if we wanted to.’

Dead on cue, the forward porthole cracked across.

Something long, black and slippery detached itself from the ocean bed. The smaller fish, having previously decided it was probably nothing to worry about, were understandably startled by this, and left the area in a number of hastily formed shoals. The shape hovered above the fissure for a few moments, as if considering the situation.

It had seen the giant squid emerge from the crack, and watched it skulk away, wounded, after the incident with the peculiar brass object. It had watched the same brass object descend into the fissure. Now the shape seemed to be on the verge of following.

At the last minute, however, it must have changed its mind. Instead, it drifted upward, towards the surface of Tyler’s Folly.

‘Did you hear that?’ said Ash. Bernice swung her torch in Ash’s direction. ‘Sounded like a big splash. From outside. Like something hit the water.’

Bernice nodded sagely. There wasn’t much point in that, to be honest, as Ash had her torch pointing the other way. McClure’s Atoll had turned out to be honeycombed with passages; they’d wandered down endless identical black tunnels, constantly falling over each other and scraping their knees on the jagged rock floor. Bernice would have assumed they’d been walking round in circles, if the caves hadn’t been getting darker and darker. No sunlight had reached them for about a hundred metres, now. Fortunately, Ash had picked up a handful of disposable plastic torches from the same

place she'd bought the palmtop. By now, they were deep into the atoll, almost certainly below sea level.

'Probably just the local constabulary,' Bernice suggested. 'This is the kind of place where they'd explode experimental nuclear weapons just for a laugh.'

'Here's another one,' said Ash, turning her torch on one of the walls. The beam was centred on a single glyph, scratched into the surface of the black rock. Bernice stroked the wall. Not scratched. Burnt. Someone had etched the symbol into the rock with a concentrated heat source, tracing white lines across the dark silicrete.

The glyph was simple, straightforward and dull. A crude circle, joined to an upwardly turned semicircle, giving the impression of a round head with a pair of horns.

'Not the same as the last one,' noted Ash. 'Any ideas?'

'It's familiar, but probably only because it's so simple. Maybe if there are more, we can start comparing them, but...'

'You don't think Kryptosa made it, then?' Bernice couldn't see Ash's expression, and thus had no way of knowing how serious she was.

'Don't forget, this atoll's only a couple of clicks from the nearest port,' Bernice said. 'Hundreds of the locals must have been here before us.'

'Not necessarily. Tyler's Folly hasn't even been properly surveyed by Earth Central. The last survey was nearly a hundred years ago, and that was a rush job. There are too many colony worlds for Earth to keep decent records. Not every interesting planet's officially designated a Site of Ancient and Esoteric Interest.'

Bernice sighed. 'Even so, it's not exactly hard to get down here, even if the area's supposed to be off limits. The point is, anyone could've made those marks. Let's keep going, see if we can find any more signs. If we find a message that says "Kryptosa Was Here", I'll be a little more optimistic.'

The patrol junks were long gone. No one was around to notice the surface of the ocean break open, or to watch the black, long-necked thing rise to the surface. Nobody was

there to see the way it paused, almost thoughtfully, before turning towards McClure's Atoll, and nobody was there to hear the rumbling sound that issued from its guts.

Which is a pity, really. It was all rather impressive.

Somewhere in the darkness, Ash heard Bernice snap her fingers. "This way",' she said. 'It's grave-robber script.'

They'd found a fifth symbol, another twenty metres or so along the tunnel. Ash fixed her torch on Bernice's face. Bernice duly squinted. 'Say again?'

'Basic symbolic language,' explained Bernice. 'Invented at the turn of the twenty-third century. By archaeologists.'

'Archaeologists?'

'Mmm-hmm. Remember, the early twenty-third century was a great time for colonialism. All kinds of new worlds were being terratweaked at the edges of human-space. The archaeologists were everywhere, digging up relics from all sorts of alien civilizations. We - I mean, they - ended up being treated as a criminal underclass in a lot of sectors. So they developed their own code. Left little messages for each other all over sites of historic interest. You know the kind of thing. "I discovered this first, so naff off." '

Ash clicked her tongue. 'So, whoever left these marks behind was...?'

'...was versed in grave-robber script,' Bernice said, warningly. 'Don't assume any more than that. The script fell out of usage before I was born, though. I don't know it fluently. I only know this particular symbol because I've seen it used to mark the trail to the public toilets on Youkali.'

Ash opened her mouth to ask what public toilets had to do with archaeology, but the question fizzled on her tongue.

The tunnel shook.

She didn't see what happened to Bernice, but she heard a thumping, scraping noise from nearby, not entirely unlike the sound of somebody falling over and swearing. Ash herself stumbled forward, only to feel part of the low tunnel ceiling bite into her forehead. She tried to raise a hand to her temple, to feel the extent of the damage, but the ground

shifted under her and she lost her balance again. This time, she fell backward.

She didn't make a sound when she hit the floor. There were random flashes of light against the tunnel roof. Her own torch was lying somewhere beside her, so the beam obviously came from Bernice's.

'Bernice,' Ash called out. 'Whhuhh gah.'

The last exclamation was prompted by something Ash had seen in the dancing torchlight. Above her, there was a crack in the rock ceiling, and it was widening, opening up like a mouth. Despite its hardness, the rock of the atoll had a roughly crystalline feel to it, and the impact, whatever it may have been, had started shaking the cavern to pieces. Ash could still feel the tremors running through the rock underneath her, ringing through the passageways.

Ash made an exotic squealing sound, then pushed herself up. She felt herself automatically roll into a ball, like one of those little video-game characters who bounce off things and perform unlikely athletic manoeuvres through the air. She wasn't entirely sure which direction her muscles were pushing her in, but no sooner had she moved than she heard a crackling, crunching noise behind her. Rock rained down from the ceiling. The vibrations continued.

The slippery thing hovered on the surface of the ocean for a few moments, its elongated neck pointing directly at the atoll. It heard the sounds of disintegrating silicrete, felt the tremors vibrating through the water. Satisfied, it submerged again, and headed back towards the fissure on the ocean floor.

'Ow,' said Bernice.

Everything had gone quiet. The rocks weren't falling, Ash wasn't squealing, the world wasn't exploding around her. Bernice twiddled her fingers, more to establish that they still existed than anything else. Slowly, she raised her hand to her face. Good. Her face was still there, as well.

'Ow,' said a voice somewhere behind her.

Bernice furrowed her eyebrows. Eyebrows in place too, then? This got better and better.

‘Was that an echo?’ she asked, aloud.

There was a pause.

‘I don’t know,’ said Ash. ‘I can’t remember.’

Bernice rolled on to her back, and was surprised how little it hurt. There was a single pinprick of light by her side. Her torch, its beam falling against the nearby wall of the tunnel. Actually, it was just a pile of collapsed rock, but it was doing the job of a wall.

She reached out for the torch, swept it around. The tunnel was a completely different shape now. It was still only a metre and a bit high, but it was much narrower than it had been. Behind Bernice, the roof had fallen in completely, blocking off their route back to the surface. Ahead, the floor had given way. The tunnel became a slope, vanishing into blackness ahead and below. Ash lay face down on the lip of the slope, a million chips of rock trapped between the spikes of her hair.

‘How am I?’ Ash asked.

Bernice moved the torch beam up and down her body. ‘You look OK. No limbs missing. But don’t move backwards. There’s a sheer slope, and it probably leads down to one of those cartoon hells where Yosemite Sam has little red horns and a pitchfork.’

Ash made a soppy moaning noise, which didn’t exactly match her butch combat chic. ‘Any ideas what happened?’

‘Well, something hit this place pretty hard. We can’t go back, and the only way forward is down.’ Bernice frowned. ‘We might be able to make it without breaking our necks. Just as long as the light holds out.’

Her disposable torch obligingly extinguished itself.

‘Ta-daah,’ said Bernice, drily.

‘Wait a minute,’ murmured Ash. ‘You’ve got the rest of the disposables in your bag, haven’t you?’

‘Happily, yes.’

‘You know where your bag is?’

‘Sadly, no. Try dropping a rock down the slope behind you, listen how long it takes to hit the bottom.’

‘I already did.’

Bernice frowned again. For her own benefit, obviously. ‘I didn’t hear it hit.’

‘Neither did I.’

They both went a bit quiet after that.

‘So,’ Bernice finally said. ‘We’re stuck in a collapsed tunnel, some way below sea level. We can’t go back because the way’s blocked. We can’t go on because there’s a bloody great hole. We haven’t told anyone where we are; we’re both suffering enough minor wounds to make us seriously grumpy if not actually incapacitated; and our only supplies are in a satchel that’s most likely buried under several tons of silicrete. Did I miss anything?’

‘Where do you think these tunnels came from?’ asked Ash.

Bernice sighed. ‘Lateral thinking?’

‘No. Trying to ignore the situation.’

‘Fine. I don’t know where they came from. They’re probably natural. Silicrete isn’t very common inside human-space, so I don’t know how it erodes, exactly. Why?’

‘Uhh. I just wondered if maybe... this place was built. Deliberately.’

‘As opposed to it being built accidentally? Seems unlikely. Who would live in an atoll like this?’

‘If this place is inhabited, we might get rescued.’

Bernice nodded. Again, just for her own benefit. ‘Or eaten by giant gopher creatures.’

‘Or that. I only mention it because of the vibrations.’

‘What?’

‘Shhh.’ There was a long silence. Bernice didn’t hear anything. ‘Feel the rock under you,’ Ash said. ‘It carries vibrations really well. It feels like... something coming. Don’t you feel it?’

Bernice touched the ground. There was, indeed, a faint vibration in the substance. It didn’t have the right rhythm for footsteps, but even so, it was regular. A shuffling, a pounding, a -

It wasn't just a vibration any more. There was a noise to go with it. A scratching at the rock. It sounded like something was eating its way into the passage, ripping whole chunks out of the walls.

Something brushed against Bernice's neck. She opened her mouth to yell, then realized it was only dust, raining down from the wall behind her. Which meant -

There was a resounding crunch. Light burst into the tunnel through a hole in the wall. One of the larger fallen rocks had been ripped out of place, creating a gap big enough for a human being to get through. Instinctively, Bernice rolled aside, and kept rolling until she was right next to Ash. A second large rock was torn away, then a third, then a fourth.

The passage beyond the rockfall was revealed, lit by orange torchlight. Real torchlight, not the battery-powered stuff. There was a single figure standing in the passageway, a dark silhouette clutching a burning brand in one hand and Hexing the fingers of the other. The figure had no equipment, no tools. He seemed to have shifted the fallen rocks aside with his bare hands.

He stepped forward, his body bent almost double in the low tunnel. Bernice had to bite her lip to stop herself gasping.

He was human - so human that he looked almost like a cartoon character, like an Earth Central propaganda synthiotype of the ideal man. He was tanned, he was muscular, and his hair was violently cropped, originally blond but now tinged with silver. Not quite the perfect superhero, then. He was too old. Not ancient, but old enough to look tired, despite the clean-cut profile and the piercing - nay, sparkling - grey eyes. In the torchlight, the veins on his thick neck were like cracks in concrete.

Bernice let her eyes wander over his body. He was wearing a leather vest, stretched taut across a pristine set of pectorals, while his trousers, also made of leather, were tight enough to show the muscles in his thighs but somehow not tight enough to display the dangly bits. Bernice forced her attention back to his face. His expression could have been interpreted as a look of grim resolution, but it could just as

well have been a look of sweaty misery. His teeth were clenched, and his jaw - the jaw that had earned him his nickname, the 'Man of Chrome' - was jutting forward.

'Oh, God,' said Ash.

'Oh, God,' agreed Bernice.

'Oh, God,' said Ash, not wanting to be outdone.

'Well?' growled Mr Misnomer. 'D'you want to get out of here, or not?'

'THE RETURN OF THE CHROME CRUSADER!'

'This is stupid,' said Bernice. Ash ground her teeth together. In the last ten minutes, Bernice had said very little else but 'this is stupid'.

They'd stopped in one of the more spacious tunnels of the atoll - spacious enough, in fact, for the word 'cavern' to fit it quite neatly. With a combination of brute force and severe grumpiness, Mr Misnomer had unearthed Bernice's satchel, which had been buried under the fallen ceiling. The disposable torches had been crushed into a substance you could probably have sold as cocaine at Xan Burrosa, but the all-purpose medipac - another luxury from the Port Lindenbrook duty-free shop - was more or less intact. As the medipac consisted of a few dozen plasters and two tubes of antiseptic ointment, this wasn't really surprising.

Now Ash and Bernice sat in the middle of the cavern, slapping the plasters over their myriad cuts and grazes, occasionally (licking rolled-up balls of antiseptic at each other and pretending they were enormous bogies. Mr Misnomer paced the cavern around them, inspecting the walls.

'How many more of these are there?' he muttered. His voice was deep, resounding, and made him sound as if his larynx had been scraped raw by several decades of synonicotine abuse. He was indicating one of the mysterious symbols.

'There's a lot of them about,' Ash volunteered. 'Every few metres. We don't know what they mean, exactly.'

'This is stupid,' Bernice reiterated.

Mr Misnomer whirled around, his eyes glinting in the light from his burning torch. 'If I'd wanted another whining

sidekick, I'd have hired one,' he grumbled. 'Just shut up and let me think, you dozy bitch.'

'Nnng,' said Ash, which was a sound she sometimes made when somebody made a terrible embarrassing mistake. If Lucretia had been there, her head would probably have exploded.

Bernice's jaw dropped. She was on her feet faster than the human eye could comfortably follow.

'Uhh, you really can't say that,' Ash told Mr Misnomer, in her most diplomatic tone of voice. Usually, she would have been on Bernice's side, but she didn't feel like starting a fight with someone who could purportedly break durilium bars with his lists.

Mr Misnomer turned to glare at her. His jaw jutted so far out from his face that it almost seemed like an independent life form. 'I'll say whatever the bloody hell I like,' he said.

'*What* did he call me?' demanded Bernice.

Ash shook her head. 'No, I meant... you're the noble-pack-alpha male hero archetype. Look, I've read the pulpzines. I know all about your primomythic character traits. Melbourne Autolits drew up a complete character profile of you in '33. It laid down the guidelines of what you can and can't do. You never hit a woman, not even if she's a communist spy android in disguise. You never kill, except in self-defence. You never carry a gun, except for your grappling-hook bolt-firer.'

Mr Misnomer was staring at her as if she were mad, or possibly something infectious.

'I said, *what* did he call me?' said Bernice.

Ash kept shaking her head. 'I'm sorry, this is getting silly. Let's try and clear this up before we kill each other. Are you supposed to be real, or not?'

'Do I look real?' Mr Misnomer snapped back.

'Too bloody real,' spat Bernice.

'Remember what I said in the thesis,' Ash told her, putting a hand on her shoulder to stop her giving Mr Misnomer a good smack in the face. 'In the thirties, the division between fantasy and historical documentary was kind of ambiguous.'

There are serious historical overtones to a lot of the autolit pulps. *Mr Misnomer versus the Queen of Xenophobia* was banned on some colony worlds, because it contained allusions to the troubles on Glasson Equinoxis. But this...' She addressed Mr Misnomer directly. 'There's no record... there's no historical record of you even existing. Does this mean all the stories were true? Even *The Fall of the House of Mr Misnomer*? Even *Mr Misnomer and the Underwater Bears*?'

Mr Misnomer didn't reply. He turned back to the wall, and carried on inspecting the grave-robber symbol, stroking it with the fingertips of a leather gauntlet, as if expecting the action to trigger a secret door somewhere.

Then, after a while, he said, 'How old do you think I am?'

Ash looked at Bernice. Bernice shrugged. 'You look like a fifty-year-old,' the professor guessed. 'Admittedly, a fifty-year-old who's been taking age-suppressant drugs and too many pep pills.'

'He doesn't need age-suppressors,' said Ash. 'He's got an ultra-slow metabolism. He learnt secret meditation techniques from the Dying Ones of New Tibet. He crash-landed there on a journey to Nepal 36. It's all in the first autolit. *The Shadow of the Dying Ones*, 2529.'

Mr Misnomer bared his teeth. He began peeling off his left gauntlet. Ash couldn't help noticing that, just as the texts claimed, there were special tools hidden inside the lining of the glove.

Then he started to punch the wall, pounding his bare fist into the surface of the rock.

Even on the other side of the cavern. Ash could feel the vibrations spreading through the silicrete, the floor trembling, humming little subsonic melodies to itself. Mr Misnomer kept hitting until whole chunks of the wall started to fall away. The piece bearing the grave-robber symbol dropped to the ground and shattered.

'This is what I can do,' Misnomer said, without any kind of feeling. 'I can punch holes in solid rock. I can use techniques to withstand temperatures that'd kill off Arcturan sun-dogs. I've wrestled giants. You understand? Giants.'

‘Stop it,’ said Bernice, but he kept swinging his fist at the wall, making the whole cavern shiver. Ash realized his hand was starting to leak blood.

‘Did I ask for this? Did I?’ He was hissing now, almost gargling, trying to hold the physical pain out of his throat. ‘This is what I can do. This is all that gives me any sense of identity. This is all I *am*.’

He struck out one last time, punching the rock with all his strength. A lump of silicrete a full metre across fell from the wall. The cavern shook. Cracks ran across the ceiling. Mr Misnomer turned away from the hole, and held up his fist, letting Ash see the wounds that had formed on his knuckles. Even as she watched, the blood clotted, and the mystical techniques of the Dying Ones (God, get a grip, girl) started repairing the damaged tissue.

‘I rescued you,’ Misnomer rumbled. ‘Not because I wanted to. Not because I liked you. Because that’s all I do. Don’t talk to me about your writer’s guideline, or the way I’m supposed to talk, or how often I’m allowed to kill anyone. Seventy years. Seventy years of being shot at, tied to torment machines, threatened by megalomaniacs. I rescued you, that’s all. Understand?’

‘Then why are you here?’ asked Bernice, quietly.

She wasn’t taking the piss any more, Ash realized, and all the anger had gone out of her voice. Because she’d decided the man was psychotic, or because she was genuinely interested?

Mr Misnomer lowered his head. ‘Because there are Dark Forces at work,’ he said.

‘Dark Forces? What kind of Dark Forces?’

‘I don’t know. Just... Dark Forces. Some terrible force has come here, to Tyler’s Folly. Something plans to unearth ancient and arcane secrets, and let loose an unimaginable power. Isn’t that enough?’ He seemed to have calmed down now, but he still sounded tired. Like a man who wanted to get on with his job, Ash thought. He started massaging his wounded fist. ‘It’s like an instinct. Like an itch. Something

pulled me here, all the way across the galaxy. All the way to this atoll. And that's good enough for me.'

Bernice was nodding. 'That's funny. We think someone led us here, as well. They've given us a story to follow up, one that doesn't make a lot of sense. They might have kidnapped a friend of ours.'

'Wonderful. Someone else to rescue. What kind of story?'

Bernice sighed. 'It's hard to explain. Well, no, it isn't. It's hard to explain while keeping a straight face. Essentially, someone wants us to think this planet's hollow. There are prehistoric monsters living on the inside, apparently.'

Mr Misnomer scowled. 'Is that all?' he said.

There had been nothing. Nothing you could get a grip on, anyway. Just speed, terror and the feeling of being stretched out of existence.

Then there had been light.

Then there had been a sense of falling, though not necessarily in the expected direction.

A great impact. The bathosphere. hitting the ground.

The light had been vicious and red, reminding Fos!ca of a setting sun. Correction. It had reminded Fos!ca of *the* setting sun, the nuclear mass at the heart of the worldsphere. The People always said their sun didn't just give them light and power. There were other advantages to living in a sphere, controlled radiations too subtle for the organic mind to even think about. There were things living in the light, the things that swarmed and multiplied in the atmosphere of a summer afternoon. The light here was the same. Not just light, but the *essence* of light.

It had made Fos!ca feel sick, though. More autumn than summer. Dead flowers and slow decay.

That had been almost an hour ago.

Fos!ca surveyed the control section for the fifty-eighth time. Like all vehicles designed by the People, the bathosphere had an almost organic symmetry coded into its design; even a simple transport like this had an aesthetic soul of its own. Now, the craft looked more like a corpse than a living thing.

The forward porthole was shattered, spider-web patterns etched across the glass. Even some of the wooden consoles were cracked, the needles and dials jittering pointlessly. Fos!ca was reminded of fish out of water, breathing the wrong kind of oxygen and getting ready to die.

The scene should have been sad. Like going to see a friend in a hospital, after a particularly bad regeneration. Instead, it was peaceful.

Because !X wasn't here. He'd left the vessel, shortly after they'd arrived, walking out of the airlock and into the new world of messy greens and browns and reds that lurked on the other side of the porthole. He hadn't bothered asking Fos!ca whether she'd wanted to come.

There was a crackling, splintering sound, which Fos!ca acknowledged without alarm. The glass of the forward porthole was knitting itself together, the suspensor fields kneading the shattered fragments back into place. How long until the ship was fully repaired? Minutes? Hours? How long until they could leave this place?

But of course, she wouldn't, couldn't, leave. God had sent her here - sent *them* here - to investigate the anomaly, and to let !X experience what the Department called 'total environment therapy'. By rights, Fos!ca should have been outside, exploring the terrain with him.

You cannot oppose God's will...

There was a series of small metallic impacts, as the suspensor fields sucked the bronze rivets from the floor of the control section and popped them back into the ceiling. Absently, Fos!ca started humming.

'Another rectangle,' said Mr Misnomer. 'Bigger, this one.'

"This way",' Bernice translated. They were well into the heart of the atoll by now. With the help of Mr Misnomer's all-purpose grappling-hook bolt-firer (every home should have one), they'd descended into the deep, deep caverns, discovering more of the symbols as they went along. Mr Misnomer was busy inspecting the latest sign, while Ash was standing at the back of the party, wielding the flaming torch.

‘Doesn’t make sense,’ muttered Mr Misnomer. ‘All the other symbols have been on passage walls. This one’s in a recess. Why?’

Bernice peered into the tiny rock alcove. ‘Maybe it was the only flat surface.’

‘No. It’s not flat.’ Mr Misnomer ran his fingers across the wall. He still hadn’t replaced his left gauntlet, and Bernice was keeping an anxious eye on him, just in case he decided to perform any more acts of fast-healing self-mutilation. Not that she really cared about his welfare, of course. She just didn’t want him bleeding on her boots. The ungloved hand was groping the silicrete, as if seeking a hidden catch.

‘Wheee.’

Bernice turned. Ash was waving the torch from side to side, writing her initials in the air, like a little kid with a sparkler. Every now and then, embers would detach themselves from the flame and hang in the air like pixie-dust.

‘Hold on a minute,’ said Bernice.

‘No, you can’t have a go,’ Ash told her.

‘I don’t want a go. Look.’ Bernice pointed to one of the loose embers. ‘Is it just me, or should that have fallen to the ground by now?’

Ash nodded. ‘I know. The sparks hang around longer than they should do. The atmosphere’s weird down here.’

‘Not *that* weird.’ Bernice felt an itching in her left earlobe, the same itching she got whenever her instincts detected something not quite right going on. (Actually, that was a downright lie. She never got any such itch. However, she was pretty sure Mr Misnomer would have instincts that finely honed, and she wasn’t going to play second fiddle to *him*, no sir.) She bent down, and scooped up a small shard of rock, shaken loose during the rockfall. She stood, held the shard a little way above the ground, then opened her hand.

The shard fell.

‘Well done,’ said Ash. ‘Would you like me to applaud?’

‘You mean you didn’t notice?’ Bernice picked the fragment up again. ‘I don’t know what kind of speed this thing fell at, but it was some way short of the standard acceleration of ten

metres per second per second. This planet's supposed to have Earth-type gravity, isn't it?'

'Couldn't it just be because we're so Car underground?'

Bernice rolled her eyes. 'Things fall faster when you're underground. Not slower.'

Ash pursed her lips. 'I don't do physics, all right? I do neuroseismology and trash culture.' She shot a glance at Mr Misnomer's back. 'No offence.'

Bernice tapped Mr Misnomer on the shoulder. 'Hey, Mr Maudlin. Something's playing hell with our gravity down here. What d'you reckon?'

Mr Misnomer grunted noncommittally, but didn't turn to face her. 'Probably some diabolical alien plot,' he murmured, without any apparent humour. 'Hah!'

With a flourish, he pulled a small chunk of silicrete away from the wall, and threw it to one side, it conspicuously missed the ground, presumably another gravitational anomaly. Nobody took much notice. Misnomer had left a hole in the rock recess, wide enough to get his hand through. Ash leant forward, illuminating the space with the torch, very nearly setting light to one of Bernice's ears in the process.

The space was black. No matter how close Ash brought the torch, it remained utterly dark. 'This isn't a wall,' explained Mr Misnomer. 'It's just a pile of loose rocks. Looks like they've been posiwelded together. Not very well, though.'

Bernice frowned. She was watching the embers from the torch. They were dancing around the hole, spiralling like water around a plughole. Mr Misnomer was already setting to work on the rest of the rock, tugging out chunks of silicrete left, right and centre. 'Once the keystone's been taken out, the whole thing starts to come apart,' he explained.

Bernice stepped back. 'Are you sure you want to do that?'

Mr Misnomer shrugged, but kept pulling the rocks away.

'Bernice is right,' said Ash. 'Can you feel it? It's like... a sucking. From the other side.'

Mr Misnomer stopped, his hand resting on the jagged edge of the hole. Bernice squinted into the darkness. Was it just her, or did his hand look longer than it had done? As if the

hole was stretching it, elongating it on a molecular level. Bernice remembered the public information bulletins she'd seen as a girl, about what happened if you flew too near an artificial black hole. 'You may begin to experience visual hallucinations or unusual time perception, in accordance with the Einstein -Schleisswinger theory of gravity...'

'Don't -' began Bernice.

Mr Misnomer tried to pull his hand away. Just for a second - albeit a second that lasted several minutes - Bernice experienced the 'unusual time perception' the films had warned her about, before the rock under Misnomer's hand crumbled from the wall and the pile of posibonded rocks simply imploded.

'BBBBBeeeeerrrrnnnnnniiiiicccccceeeee?????' yelled Ash, wondering why she suddenly sounded like a very fat cartoon character.

'DDDDooooonnnn""tttt.....' Bernice's voice was saying. The words filled Ash's ears and wedged themselves up her nostrils as she tell through the void. Of course, her nostrils were easy targets, as they did seem to be several kilometres wide all of a sudden.

'.....tttoouuuuccchhh.....' Bernice continued.

'Wwwhhheeeerrreee aaarrreee wwweee???' Ash tried.

'.....tthhaan,' concluded Bernice.

'I said -' stammered Ash, but was distracted by the fact that all her bodily parts were the right size again.

'Gravitational matrix,' somebody growled. Mr Misnomer's voice was boomy enough as it was, without being stretched into infinity and amplified through every cell of Ash's body.

'Like an airlock between two different gravitational fields,' expanded Bernice. 'Whatever's going on down here, it's... Whuuh. Goodness, are my ankles really that fat?'

'Head for the light,' boomed Mr Misnomer. 'Up ahead. It's the other side of the matrix. We're going into the interior of the planet.'

'No, this doesn't make sense,' said Bernice. 'If Kryptosa made those marks on the cave walls, he must have done it

from the atoll side, after the rocks had been welded together. But in that case, he must have escaped from wherever iitt iiss ttthhhaaattt wwweee”rrreee ggggoooooiiiiinnnnngggg nnnnoooooowwww.....’

‘Wwwwwhhhhhhaaaaattttt?????’ asked Ash. but the light at the end of the tunnel was already pulling at her feet. For the first time, she noticed tiny motes of dust suspended in the sunbeams, motes of dust with little faces, hungry mouths, snapping teeth. The dust began chewing its way into her nervous system, eating her DNA and excreting microscopic lumps of angst and paranoia in its wake.

When Ash recovered, there was solid ground under her back and hot sunlight on her skin. She looked around, only to find herself in an environment that was quite obviously impossible.

'PERIL FROM THE DAWN OF TIME!'

According to rumour, the cavern had been used as a Chamber of Muttering for a million years, and hadn't changed one iota in all that time. The dust was afraid to settle there, the stories said, while Time herself never set foot within the Chamber's walls for fear of being tried and executed by the Eldest. Indeed, some claimed the Eldest were as old as the cavern itself, their wisdom being the wisdom of the aeons.

Exactly two of these claims were true.

Thirteen figures stood in their allotted positions around the Chamber, arranged in a pattern that would have meant nothing to any visitor, its strange geometry understood only by the Eldest themselves. The thirteen stood motionless, eyes tight shut, bodies held upright only by their long-suffering retainers.

They were elsewhere. Their nervous systems extended into subsensory dimensions, connecting with the neural networks of the ones-who-flew. Seeing through other eyes. Smelting through other scent systems.

The world unfolded beneath them.

It was definitely a sun. Not just any old light source, Bernice noted, but a fully-fledged bona fide sun, big, fierce and orange. She tried moving her eyes around in their sockets. She didn't want to risk moving her whole head, not yet. The journey through the gravity matrix had left her neck muscles feeling like that soft-yet-rubbery-French-cheese-she-couldn't-quite-remember-the-name-of. To her right, she could see an expanse of green. Shrubbery. Familiar-looking.

'Zzzzzzz,' said the huge mutant blood-sucking dragonfly on her chest.

Cycads! Not really her field, but she'd seen enough documentrix footage about prehistoric Earth to recognize the shape of the fronds. All right, so she was outside. How was that possible? The gravity matrix had been a portal into a different gravitational field, but she'd only expected it to lead deeper into the bowels of Tyler's Folly. True, the matrix might have done peculiar things to space-time, and it could have been kilometres from one side to another, but there was no way it should have warped them back up to the surface.

Unless, of course...

No, no, no. This was the twenty-sixth century, and she was a liberal-minded kind of domesticated mammal, but there was no way Bernice was going to start believing in the Inner World. Good grief, thinking this through was hard work. She was so tired, all of a sudden. Even taking into account the damage the gravity shift had done to her muscles, she was having a job keeping her eyes open. Why was her body so weak?

'Zzzzzzzzz,' the huge mutant blood-sucking dragonfly reminded her.

'Oh yes,' said Bernice. 'That's it. Aaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhg.'

The dragonfly's proboscis had drilled its way right through her shirt, and two incisor-like appendages had already punctured her skin. There was a tickling sensation between her breasts, about a centimetre under the epidermis. Two green compound eyes, the size of ping-pong balls, stared up at her from her chest. There was a tiny circle of displaced blood and pus around the entry wound.

Blood. The human brain, Bernice had read in some poxy psychological journal or other, reacted badly to the sight of blood, especially one's own. Suddenly, her brain went into chemical overdrive, leaving the rest of her to cheer it on from the sidelines. Bernice started hitting the insect, breaking its legs with the first blow, punching herself in the stomach with the second, inadvertently driving the dragonfly's needles

further into her chest with the third. The buzzing turned into a screeching, but the thing didn't die.

Something big and black swept into vision, reaching out towards Bernice's chest. Some deep-rooted instinct wanted to tell the shape to keep its bloody hands to itself. Then there was pain, so sharp as to be almost medical.

Mr Misnomer snapped the dragonfly's wings off, dropped it on the ground, and stomped on it. It didn't stop buzzing until a full thirty seconds after it was dead.

Bernice hauled herself to her feet, hyperventilating all the while. She found herself staring at Mr Misnomer's rippling muscles, at the sweat forming on his skin under the leather vest. Then she found herself wondering if this heavy-breathing thing was making her bosom heave in a feminine and vulnerable manner.

'Bugs,' Mr Misnomer growled. 'Hate 'em.'

Bernice fell back against something which, if she'd been in a more lucid state of mind, she would have described as looking like an enormous, rooted pineapple. It was prickly, but it stopped her falling over. At last, she began to get a grip on her surroundings. All around her, there were trees – trees with trunks three metres wide, which towered above them and dropped squashy berries into the undergrowth. None of the plants here were particularly remarkable in shape, even if a lot of them did seem to have been overinflated, but the colours... deep greens, sickly russets and (above all) disgusting purples. The jungle looked like it had been made for a Technicolor movie, in the days before Hollywood set-designers had developed concepts like 'taste' and 'restraint'. There were rocks, too. Big purply-grey *Star Trek* rocks.

A few yards away - just next to the spot where Bernice had been lying, in fact - was the edge of a crater. The lip was ringed by trees, but she could see across to the other side, about two hundred metres away, where the jungle began again. There was no visible bottom to the crater. The light was, in a very real sense, being sucked down into it.

‘The gravity matrix.’ muttered Mr Misnomer. ‘Must be funnel-shaped. A couple of metres wide at the atoll, a few hundred here.’

Bernice shook her head, caught her breath, and performed several other minor metabolic functions not worth mentioning. ‘It can’t be an ordinary gravity matrix. According to the laws of physics, we should be somewhere deep under the surface of the planet by now.’

‘I thought we were.’

‘Drivel,’ snapped Bernice. Faster than she’d meant to. ‘If we’re underground, what’s that?’

She pointed towards the sun, directly overhead. Mr Misnomer sniffed. ‘Isn’t it obvious? It’s the planet’s core.’

Even Bernice had no answer to that.

‘We’re standing on the inner crust of Tyler’s Folly,’ he went on. ‘That’s what the matrix was there for. Instead of being attracted to the centre of the world, we’re in a gravity field that attracts us back towards the surface. Makes sense, doesn’t it?’

‘No,’ said Bernice. ‘It doesn’t. Wait a minute. Where’s Ash?’

Mr Misnomer shrugged. ‘Must have come out of the matrix somewhere else around the crater.’

‘Right. First thing we do is find her.’ Bernice started to walk along the crater rim, careful not to get close enough to be sucked back into the funnel. Her legs were still wobbling under her weight, but she wasn’t going to let Misnomer see that. ‘Then, we try to figure out where we really are. Then, we try to figure out who wanted to bring us here. Then, we try to figure out who kidnapped Lucretia. Then...’

She lost her place.

‘...then we sort out any remaining loose ends,’ she finished, lamely. ‘Good plan?’

Mr Misnomer snorted contemptuously, but didn’t say a word.

Fifteen minutes later, they found the outcrop.

They’d followed the lip of the crater, until they’d reached a point where the path had been blocked by a huge mound of

what looked like diamond, sparkling smugly in the orange sunlight. The mound appeared to have fallen out of the sky, and Mr Misnomer had speculated that it was a chunk of debris that had dropped from the planet's core. Bernice had said this was silly and contrary to every known law of science, and Mr Misnomer had been halfway through recounting the entirely unscientific events of his adventure *Mr Misnomer and the Fiend Without a Future* before remembering he really couldn't be bothered with that sort of thing any more.

Whatever the reason for its existence, the diamond lump had forced them to change course. They'd threaded their way through the trees, heading deeper into the jungle, walking for a full five minutes before getting hopelessly lost. Eventually, they'd noticed the ground starting to rise, becoming a kind of escarpment where the trees thinned out.

That was when they'd stumbled on to the outcrop.

"For the world is hollow and I have lost my lunch",' quoth Bernice.

'Told you,' said Mr Misnomer.

The jungle ended here, at the edge of a cliff. Unlike the crater, there was something at the bottom of the cliff that could definitely be called ground, several hundred metres below. The outcrop was a wedge-shaped lump of rock projecting out over the edge, and from it the two of them had an ideal view of the landscape.

The land, Bernice realized, was set on two different levels, as if some terrible geological glitch had caused large areas of the landscape to sink. She could see a dozen or so raised sections of ground, kilometres-wide platforms of rock towering over the sunken areas below. The jungle behind them grew on top of one of the raised sections, the cliff on which they now stood being the edge of the platform. A couple of clicks away, she could make out the foothills of mountains on the far side of the jungle. The highest peaks were on the limits of her vision, but she was sure they were truncated, volcanos with their lips blown off.

All this would have made for a pretty spectacular view in itself. But the things Bernice could see below her, littering the surface of the sunken world, caused every reasonable adjective she knew to drop out of her brain.

There were more jungles down there, trees that seemed to have been growing for millions of years. Even from this height, Bernice could see signs of animal activity. On one particularly sparse plain, she caught sight of a giant lizard, basking in the Technicolor glare of the sun. She might have called it a dinosaur, but it didn't look like any species she'd ever seen, either in skeletal museum form or regened reconstruction. It looked like an ordinary lizard, the kind you might keep as a pet if you were especially rich and stupid, but blown up to an enormous size. A few multicoloured fins and horns had been stapled to its body, as if some insane god had decided this would make the poor creature look more exotic.

Above the mountains, there were more signs of life, huge airborne shapes Bernice couldn't quite identify. She squinted as hard as she could possibly squint, and noticed that the shapes were hovering around one specific plateau on the side of the nearest mountain.

She rubbed her eyes. The sheer garishness of the scene was making her head hurt. Also, some unconscious mental process was trying to force her eyes to concentrate on the horizon, and there didn't seem to be one.

'No horizon,' she said, out loud.

'Of course there isn't a horizon,' grunted Mr Misnomer. He was taking the whole thing in his stride. 'I told you. We're on the inside of the planet. The ground curves away into the distance.'

Bernice stumbled towards the edge of the outcrop, daring the drop. 'I know. But it's... the way my eyes are trying to focus on things in the distance. It's familiar. I've been somewhere like this before.'

'Yeah?' Mr Misnomer sounded dubious. Presumably, he felt he was the only one around here who should have experience in weird shit.

Hollow planets, Bernice prompted herself. Standing on the inside of the world. Ground curving off into the distance.

No horizon.

Dyson spheres.

'The worldsphere,' she hissed. 'The People.'

Mr Misnomer opened his mouth to ask what she meant - at least, that's what Bernice liked to think he was doing with his jaw - but at that precise moment, a shadow fell across the outcrop, sweeping across them both. Bernice was left with the impression of something birdlike, gliding through the air above them before vanishing into the treetops of the jungle.

'What was that?' asked Bernice.

'Probably just a pterodactyl,' said Mr Misnomer.

The Youngest of the Eldest opened his eyes, instantly breaking the connection. Through the senses of the one-who-flew, all thirteen of them had seen the visitors, the two bald pink things that stood on the outcrop and asked stupid questions.

There was an ominous silence. When the Youngest finally spoke, he sounded nervous. Partly because of the great events unfolding in the world around them, but mostly because he was scared the others would laugh at him if he said the wrong thing.

'What does it mean?' he enquired.

'Ft means we've got another bunch of aliens to deal with,' one of the others coughed.

The Youngest nodded enthusiastically, and his retainers struggled to keep him upright. 'Yes. Yes. But I meant, what does it mean, theologically? Another omen, or...?'

'What do the prophecies say?' another asked.

The Eldest of the Eldest tutted. 'I wish you wouldn't call them that. It's embarrassing. They're not prophecies, they're records.'

'Records of things that haven't yet happened might as well be prophecies. Answer the question.'

'The answer is, we have no way of knowing. The records only say the emissary is coming, and nothing will ever be the

same again. I think by now we've established which of the visitors is the emissary. As for the others... they surely can't be unconnected.'

'Could it all be a gigantic coincidence?' asked the Youngest. The others groaned.

'Not that old chestnut,' someone else murmured. 'Besides, I think "emissary" sounds just as embarrassing as "prophecies".'

'We might not have to deal with the remaining two parties ourselves, anyway,' volunteered the Youngest, trying to regain face. 'You saw where they were, yes? Sabre-tooth territory. Perhaps the problem will sort itself out.'

'We can but hope,' muttered one of the others.

Ash was hiding behind a woolly mammoth. She didn't consider this a natural position for someone of her age and social background, but then, she was only doing it to get away from the sabre-toothed tiger that had been following her ever since she'd arrived in the Inner World. Presumably, absurd situations called for absurd measures.

When she'd picked herself up out of the dirt, and the tiger's eyes had peered out of the undergrowth at her, she'd started running simply because running was the only thing that seemed to make sense. Only now, crouching in the shade of a two-ton slab of hair and elephant flesh, did she start to come to her senses.

Eventually, she noticed the smell. God almighty, it was revolting. That was the difference between the autolits and the reality, Ash decided: the stink. Mr Misnomer, whose actual existence she still wasn't convinced by, had smelt of old sweat. Not the most unpleasant scent Ash had ever encountered, but it was hardly the manly, heroic musk of legend. The smell had been flat, almost metallic. Real. You never get to read what the characters smell like, or how good their complexions are, or if they keep their nails clean. The mammoths, which she'd always imagined to be noble, dignified creatures, were covered in so many different kinds

of dirt at close range they were little more than stinking carpets with legs.

The sabre-tooth was still somewhere on the other side of the animal, probably trying to stalk her by scent. It'd have a job, anyway. The mammoths were arranged in a cluster at one side of an enormous clearing, a gap in the jungle where they'd presumably trampled the undergrowth to bits. The creatures seemed unconcerned about there being a potential predator lurking around the clearing. Possibly, they had very limited senses, and couldn't detect the sabre-tooth amid the greenery. On the other hand, they might just not have cared. Would a single tiger take on a whole herd of these things, just to get at her. Ash wondered?

Yeah, right. She was trying to figure out the ecology of an environment that was patently impossible in the first place. Some hope.

There was a rustling on the other side of the mammoth. It had to be the tiger, Ash reasoned. Moving towards her, or away from her?

She held her breath. It didn't make her any harder to track, but it made the stench easier to take. She surveyed the herd as it milled around her. Maybe she could get across the clearing without being spotted, by making her way from mammoth to mammoth. Right? Right.

The ground was softer here than it had been elsewhere in the jungle, almost mudlike. Ash huddled behind another mammoth - it was smaller than the first, and thus smelt only about half as bad - and moved forward again, careful to always keep at least one prehistoric pachyderm between herself and the point where she'd entered the clearing. The mammoths were still just standing around, looking generally bored. Ash wondered about that. Maybe she was reading too much into their stupid faces, but they looked like they were waiting for something.

From up ahead, there was the sound of heavy movement. Mud squelching, water splashing. Ash saw one of the mammoths in front of her hauling itself forward, and suddenly figured out what was going on. This wasn't a

clearing at all. The real reason the jungle had thinned out was that she'd reached the edge of a lake. The mammoths had obstructed her view of the water, but now she could see it was some kind of watering hole. Space by the shore was limited; this was the local equivalent of queuing up outside the bathroom.

Sure enough, one of the things was moving away from the water's edge now, stomping back towards the jungle. All around Ash, the others were shuffling forward, jostling each other as they got closer to the lake. Ash slipped deftly between them, until the water was up to the tops of her boots. It was the safest place she could think of. The tiger wouldn't be able to make it this far. and besides, cats hated water. Scientifically established fact. At one point, one of the larger specimens of mammothhood eyed her warily, but it seemed more concerned about her jumping the queue than her being a potential threat.

Ash took several deep breaths, though not through her nose, obviously. She decided to wait here for a while, hopefully until the sabre-tooth got bored and wandered off, before heading back towards the crater. With any luck, there'd be a way back to the atoll there. And if not...

The mammoths shifted uneasily. Ash looked around, half expecting to see the sabre-tooth creeping up on her.

At first, nothing seemed to be going on. Then she noticed the mammoths edging away from the water's edge. Those who were already in the lake trundled back on to dry land in reverse gear. The ground shook. That was all it took to shake the ground; they didn't even have to stampede - they just had to shuffle in unison. With the creatures retreating, Ash got her first good look at the lake. It was roughly circular, at least a hundred metres across, its waters dark and full of mammoth dung, surrounded by jungle on all sides.

The water rippled. The mammoths had noticed it long before Ash had, which either said great things about their senses or lousy things about hers. Something was hovering beneath the surface. Ash could see its shadow, slowly rising,

like an animal coming up for air. A sea creature, maybe? But if it was alive, it couldn't possibly survive in a body of water this small. Perhaps the lake was connected to an underground river, or...

The surface of the lake broke open. Something long, black and slippery started to emerge, filthy water sliding off its upper surface. The main body of the object was cigar-shaped, but it had an elongated neck, ending in a head that remained below the waterline. There was an unsettling grumbling sound, and the thing ground to a halt, still partially submerged.

Half of Ash's consciousness told her that, in this environment, the thing had to be some kind of aquatic reptile, quite possibly a plesiosaur. The other half told her to run like a bastard.

Then, just as it seemed things couldn't get any stranger, there was a hydraulic hissing sound from the sea monster's innards, and a metal hatch opened up in its side.

'ATTACK OF THE DEATH-NAZIS!'

'Do you know what a Dyson sphere is?' Bernice asked.

She trudged on through the undergrowth, Mr Misnomer beside her, trampling on the Jurassic-era orchids as they went. Misnomer shrugged grumpily, which Bernice interpreted as a no.

'Dyson spheres are products of ultra-high-level technological civilizations,' she explained, glad she was getting the chance to explain something to him for once. 'Basically, what you do is, you get a sun - any sun, as long as it's stable - and build a shell around it. You might want to get your parents to help you with this bit.'

They were, in theory at least, heading back towards the crater. From the outcrop, Bernice had been able to get a rough idea of the terrain. The crater, she'd hazarded, lay in a direction they were calling 'west'. As the sun never rose or fell here, and Mr Misnomer's boot compass kept changing its mind about which way was north, the term 'west' was being used in an entirely spurious manner.

'A shell around the sun?' queried Mr Misnomer. 'It'd have to have an area of... what? A couple of trillion square clicks? What are you going to build this shell out of, anyway?'

Bernice waved the objection aside. That is, she flapped her arms in a stupid way until Mr Misnomer noticed and stopped talking. 'Metal, artificial compounds, milk-bottle tops, whatever you've got lying around. I did say you needed to be an ultra-high-level culture to get away with it. Anyway, once you've built the thing, you get the rest of your species to live in it. On the inside of the shell. It's the perfect stable environment. You've got a limitless source of energy, because the sun's right there at your fingertips, and you've got

enough living space for a couple of quadrillion people. Earth scientists have always considered a stable Dyson sphere to be impossible, in practice. But I've seen one, in another galaxy. It's inhabited by the People.'

'What people?'

'The People. Thai's what they call themselves.' I knew explaining this was going to be uphill work. Bernice told herself. 'The People live inside this worldsphere of theirs, with almost unlimited resources at their disposal. And when you live in a society with unlimited resources, everyone has a terrible habit of being extremely nice to each other. Everyone has what they want, there's no poverty, no greed, and the People are practically indestructible. They only have about one murder every X thousand years, and the only wars they ever have are with hostile alien cultures. Theoretically.'

'Sounds bloody appalling,' said Mr Misnomer. 'So what? You think this planet's a Dyson sphere as well?'

'Good question. Actually, no, it's a bleeding obvious question. The thing about the worldsphere is, it's a Dyson sphere that *knows* it's a Dyson sphere. Whereas Tyler's Folly is a Dyson sphere that thinks it's a *planet*. I still think it's odd the Earth authorities never noticed all of this. The place is a guaranteed money-spinner. Even apart from the diamonds, there's a fortune to be made from the Gwangi-fried chicken franchises. Dinosaur-based fast food has got to be a surefire winner.'

'But you're sure this place is artificial?'

Bernice nodded. 'Has to be. The question is. why would anyone go to all the trouble of making a Dyson sphere inside a planet instead of around a sun? And why would they bother stocking it with dinosaurs? And how come... ooofah.'

She'd run right into Mr Misnomer's extended arm. It had been like walking into an iron bar. Man of Chrome? Man of Brick Shithouse, more like. Misnomer was standing stock still, his face frozen, and even his hair looked like it'd been glued into place. 'D'you feel that?' he hissed.

'Feel what?' said Bernice.

The ground shook. Only very slightly, but it shook.

‘Earthquake?’ Mr Misnomer suggested.

Bernice sniffled dubiously. ‘In an environment like this, it could be anything. Could be a pack of approaching prehistoric mole people, for all we know.’

‘Corniche,’ Mr Misnomer muttered.

‘What?’

‘Corniche. It’s the collective noun for prehistoric mole people.’

‘How the hell do you know that?’

‘I know a thing or two about prehistoric mole people, trust me. An arch enemy of mine once recovered two live specimens from the arctic circle, frozen in blocks of ice. He planned to defrost them and use them to terrorize New Glasgow. Damn near succeeded, as well.’

The tremor got worse. There were splintering sounds from the jungle, like trees being uprooted, or brushed aside by something large and careless.

‘It’s not mole people,’ Mr Misnomer announced. A split second later, the jungle exploded.

In front of Bernice’s eyes, two of the smaller red-skinned trees were forced aside, bent over - but not quite broken - by the cloud of dust and hair that burst into view. Bernice was surrounded by dirt, a fog of displaced soil, stinking like a cowshed.

The jungle had vanished. All she could see were tree trunks, dozens and dozens of hairy brown tree trunks, thundering past her head in pairs. She attempted to make sense of this, and finally figured out that she’d actually fallen over, on to her side. The things going past were legs. Four of them hurtled towards her face, apparently oblivious to her presence.

Bernice screeched, and rolled aside. The woolly mammoth stampeded past, spraying her with earth. After a few moments of sheer terror and mindless yowling, Bernice managed to drag herself up. She didn’t have time to look around, or even get her bearings. The black blur she now identified with Mr Misnomer swept past her, catching hold of her hand and tugging her further into the jungle.

‘Don’t stop moving,’ he yelled. Bernice kept running. She tried to wipe the last of the muck out of her eyes with her one free hand as Misnomer guided her between the trees, and her tear ducts went into overdrive. Through the wet haze, she glimpsed something bright and shiny in the foliage ahead, a spark of light glinting off an unseen object. Behind the spark, something moved. More mammoths? More vampire insects? Some other horror the underworld felt like throwing at them?

Suddenly, Mr Misnomer’s hand wasn’t there. Bernice weighed up all options before deciding to just fall over.

Which was lucky, as the jungle was suddenly rent asunder by a gunshot, audible even over the receding sound of the mammoth stampede. The air above Bernice’s head was momentarily troubled by a small, yet precise, lead projectile.

Bernice lay among the fronds for a while. After a few moments, the sound of elephantine footsteps faded into the distance. There were only so many mammoths in the world, she reasoned - the supply had to run out sometime.

Bernice wiped her hand across her eyes. Right in front of her face was a tube of polished metal, which she expertly identified as a gun.

An old-fashioned gun. at that. A basic projectile rifle. She thought about the metallic glint she’d seen in the shadows, and concluded that its owner liked to keep his weapons nice and shiny. A-hah. The sign of a dangerous and obsessive mind.

She focused on the figure at the ‘sale’ end of the weapon. He was human, but Bernice found this less than reassuring, somehow. There were five or six more of the men, standing in a loose circle around her, and out of the corner of one eye she saw they had Mr Misnomer surrounded, too. All the men wore black uniforms, fashioned from some wrinkleproof material based on either rubber or latex. Bernice was reminded of dirty old men in raincoats and old galoshes. The uniforms were topped off by hats (black, peaked, studded with silver) and jackboots (immaculate). The blackness was broken only by the paleness of the men’s faces, and by the

brilliant red armbands they wore, marked with some military insignia or other, though Bernice couldn't quite make it out from down here on Planet Mud.

The nearest of the men raised his right boot, and planted it on Bernice's shoulder. He waved the rifle at her face. Meaningfully.

'*Schweinhund!*' he barked. 'You may consider yourself a prisoner of war. Do not attempt to move.'

Ash kept running. She'd stayed at the lake long enough to see the men clambering out of the sea serpent - half a dozen of them, by the time she'd turned and scarpered, all dressed in dinky little black rubber uniforms, all carrying replica antique rifles. She hadn't recognized the symbol they wore on their sleeves, though some deep-rooted atavistic instinct noted the combination of black costumes and red armbands, and told her to vanish. She'd left the mammoth stampede behind, but the vibrations were still trying to shake her sense of balance out of her system.

She lost her footing again. Fell flat on her face. Spat out some ferns she hoped weren't poisonous. Scrambled to her feet, trying to keep her dignity.

After all, she was being watched.

No, don't think that. You've got no reason to think that at all. You don't know for a fact...

You're being watched.

How do you know?

Because this place, whatever and wherever it is, wants to keep you in its sights. Ever since you got here, something's been skulking around the corner, waiting for you to drop your guard. The tigers. The sea-monster submarine thing. The Inner World won't leave you alone.

No. This place is making you paranoid, that's all.

Yeah, but that doesn't mean it's not true. For example, it can't have escaped your notice that there are sounds of collapsing foliage behind you. Unless the shrubs are tearing themselves out of the ground in your footsteps - and let's face it, that's a scary kind of thought in itself - then you're being

followed. Something's still on your tail. Probably the tiger again. Go on, turn round, see if I'm not right.

No, I'm not going to give you the satisfaction. There's nothing there. See that? Up ahead, through the trees. Looks like light. Sign of civilization. Must be Bernice and Mr Misnomer. We're going to be all right.

Crash, trample, thud. You heard that, didn't you? Don't pretend. Go on, turn round. Give in to it.

Shan't. See, we're coming up to the light now. Bernice will tell you. There's nothing behind me but...

Oh.

Oh, right.

Ash had reached the edge of a small clearing. It wasn't a natural clearing, though. Something had punched a hole in the vegetation, tearing through the canopy and pushing aside the trees, three of which now lay sprawled around the opening at uncomfortable angles.

In the middle of the clearing was an object clearly not native to this environment. It was a sphere. Made from brass, or something with the colour and texture of brass, a series of curved metallic plates bolted together across its hull. Parts of the framework were dented and singed, but Ash couldn't help thinking of it as a gigantic rubber ball, and she imagined that all you'd have to do to get it back into shape was blow into the nozzle.

Then something crashed through the foliage, moving so loudly that it must, surely, have wanted Ash to hear it. As if it were trying to scare her, not catch her. Or scare her *before* catching her.

Go on. Turn round.

Oh... all right then.

There was a massive impact against Ash's shoulders, as the thing that had been tracking her launched itself at her back and knocked her to the ground.

Bernice opened her eyes. There was a face hovering above her head. The face was in its thirties, but had a desperate, pleading quality to it, as if it had tried to twist itself into

something younger-looking. There were residual streaks of pink in the dark mop of hair, results of a disastrous experiment with an autostyle follicle pen and a bottle of Scotch on Christmas Eve.

‘Hello, gorgeous,’ Bernice told her reflection.

‘Good eventag,’ burred a voice in her ear. Bernice flinched, then identified the dialect as Germanglish, a hybrid language quite common on some of the older colony worlds. The accent was ludicrously thick. ‘Please, do not waste your strength trying to escape, ja? You are quite unable to move.’

‘I know,’ said Bernice, testily. ‘I’m attached to an operating slab by durilium electro-clamps.’

There was a surprised pause. ‘Ach. But you have only now regained consciousness, ja? How could you know...?’

‘You think I don’t know what being attached to an operating slab by durilium electro-clamps feels like? You must think I’m an amateur.’ Bernice craned her neck, tried to focus on the figure standing next to the table. All she could see were a surgical apron, a paper mask, a monocle.

There was a pause. Then a second figure stepped into view. This one was taller, and wore the same style of uniform as the goons who’d tranquillized her in the jungle, albeit with more pips on his hat. The man seemed to be bald under the leather cap, and wore a pair of wire-rimmed glasses. His features reminded Bernice of a toad that had swallowed something slightly larger than its face.

‘Professor Summerfield, I assume?’ he said.

Bernice glared at him. ‘Let me guess. You’re the leader of my local fan club, and you’ve decided to kidnap me as an indication of your obsessive love. Am I close?’

The man laughed. Drily. ‘Most amusing, Professor. But I do know of you by reputation. I have read your book on Martian primitive culture. Most fascinating, though unnecessarily biased in the Martians’ favour.’

‘Oh. Well, maybe you’ll prefer the sequel. I’m calling it *Fear and Sloathes in Las Vegas*. You get a free lobotomy with every copy. How did you know who I was? Not from the book, I hope. I made sure the author’s photo looked nothing like me.’

'Your... companion told us you might be dropping by.'

Bernice narrowed her eyes. 'Lucretia?'

The man nodded.

'You were the man at Xan Burrosa, weren't you? I heard all about your bid. You offered an awful lot of money for that rock. Which means you knew about Kryptosa's journal.'

'Very perceptive, Professor Summerfield. Indeed. We have had an interest in the Inner World for some time, though its location remained a mystery to us. I was quite disappointed when your friends obtained the journal before we could.'

'You knew about all this?' Bernice tried to indicate the world around her with a casual wave of her hand, but obviously couldn't. 'How?'

The man didn't speak for a while. The empty space was filled by his rasping, guttural breaths. 'We have our sources,' he said, eventually.

'How intriguingly vague. Who are you, by the way?'

The man clicked his heels together, and Bernice saw him fight back the instinct to salute. Not professional military, then, just a good pretender. No pro soldier would salute a captive, even accidentally. 'Kommander Ernst Katastrophen,' the man said, formally. 'Of the SSSSSSS.'

Bernice's eyes widened. 'The Stella Stora Sigma Schuu Staffel SturmSoldaten?'

'Our reputation precedes us,' said the *kommander*. There was a self-satisfied look on his face, which Bernice immediately decided to wipe off.

'If you can call it a reputation. You're the most ineffectual neo-Nazi group since the Outer Hebridean National Party. So pathetic, the only powerbase you've got is a small sausage factory on Smarley's World.' Bernice's eyes flickered to the red band on Katastrophen's arm, marked with the *oktika*, the eight-armed 'crooked cross' used by many of the off-world fascist groups. 'What are you doing here, for heaven's sake?'

Katastrophen smiled thinly. 'Please, Professor. Your abuse is quite unnecessary. Suffice to say we have a certain, ahh, genetic interest in Tyler's Folly.'

‘Oh yes. Genetics. I remember now. Very into genetics, the SSSSSSS. In fact, if I’m not mistaken, your attempts to drop your own grubby little DNA packages all over space-time were the reason Earth outlawed your organization in the first place. Still at it, are we?’

Katastrophen waved the query aside. The bastard, thought Bernice, he’s just waving because he knows I can’t. ‘I see no reason to tell you our plans, Professor Summerfield.’

‘Oh, go on. Look, I’m tied up. I’m helpless. Tell me everything.’ Bernice frowned. ‘For a start, you can tell me where I am.’

‘On our submarine. Naturally.’

‘Your submarine?’

‘Quite. The submarine is disguised as an aquatic dinosaur, for the usual aesthetic reasons. As soon as we learnt you’d found the journal inside the rock, we knew you’d lead us to Kryptosa’s greatest discovery. You see, Professor, we followed you to Tyler’s Folly.’

‘Ah. The rockfall back at the atoll -’

‘One of our torpedoes. We didn’t expect you to survive. Needless to say, the error will not be repeated.’

If it’s needless, thought Bernice, then don’t say it. Fop. ‘And where’s Lucretia now?’

Again, Katastrophen waved the query aside. Just taking the piss, really. ‘Enough questions. The *doktor* here is impatient, I can see.’ He stepped aside, allowing the figure in the white coat to shuffle forward. ‘Evidently, Professor, you have a low opinion of our genetic skills. Perhaps we might be allowed to change your mind?’

The *doktor* raised his hand. Something glinted in his grip. Glinted, the way Mr Misnomer’s teeth were supposed to glint. Bernice didn’t recognize the implement, but it was too much like an electric can-opener for her liking. The *doktor* pressed a metal stud on the device’s handle, and it started to buzz like a vibroknife. Bernice bit her lip.

‘The *doktor* simply wants to take a number of biosamples from your body,’ explained Katastrophen, offhandedly. ‘We never miss an opportunity to expand our knowledge of

genetic programming. You have nothing to fear... at least, not yet.'

The whirring thing came closer to Bernice's face, tiny silver prongs sprouting from its tip. She caught the eye of her reflection, hovering overhead.

'Don't just lie there,' she told it. '*Do something!*'

Chairman Manx's face flickered on die wall of the office, as if ready to burst out of his vid-ink cocoon and turn into something wildly exotic. Officer Quinton Pupp caught the movement out of the corner of one eye, and turned to watch the name MANX fading in and out of existence. Every centimetre of his skin prickling, every thought in his head falling apart, every nerve in his body waiting for the end of the world.

Eventually, the flickering stopped. Manx resumed his usual solemn pose. False alarm, thought Pupp, trying to keep his heart rate under control. The Honourable Chairman must just have had a bit of a coughing fit. Some hack at the newsnet had probably started spreading rumours about terminal pneumonia.

Pupp remembered the end of the interview with the alien 'archaeologist'. He hadn't said a word as Summerfield had rattled on about sabre-toothed tigers and woolly mammoths, saving his questions until a natural gap had developed in her story. She'd got up to the bit about her being captured by fascists before she'd had to stop for breath, choking on the words and bringing up dry bile.

'A submarine?' he'd queried. 'Disguised as a... a dinosaur?'

Summerfield had nodded, and coughed the last of the gunge out of her throat.

'Absurd,' he'd scoffed.

Summerfield had shrugged. 'I don't see why,' she'd croaked. 'All you have to do is bolt on a neck and a couple of flippers. Bob's your uncle. Instant Loch Ness Monster.'

Pupp had shaken his head. 'Ms Summerfield, I have no problem with the idea of a submarine being disguised as a giant lizard, though I don't see why anyone would want to do it -'

She'd opened her mouth to explain. Pupp hadn't let her.

'However, I'd remind you that this planet has some of the most stringent import and export restrictions in this part of the galactic spiral. Frankly, it'd be impossible to get a vehicle like that to Tyler's Folly without the Republic noticing. Unless you're saying these "space Nazis" of yours are native to our planet?'

Summerfield had looked cross. Was that all? Just cross? 'Of course they weren't. I told you. The SSSSSSSS... hang on, how many S's was that?'

'Eight.'

'Sorry. The SSSSSSSS has its home base about four hundred light years away.'

'Then how, exactly, did the submarine get here?'

'Simple,' Summerfield had said. 'It was fitted with a warp drive.'

Pupp wasn't sure what he'd done then. He'd probably just blinked stupidly.

'What?' he'd said.

'A warp drive. They must have crossed the galaxy in a series of small warp-jumps. Probably via the wetworlds along Ignatz's Passage. They turned up in one of your oceans without even showing up at your poxy spaceport.'

Pupp hadn't exactly been speechless, but he'd been getting there. 'A... submarine? With a warp drive? That is the most... that really is... that's ridiculous. Utterly ridiculous.'

'Why? A standard warp drive only weighs a couple of tonnes. You can fit one in any heavy vehicle. You could wire one into a landtrain, if you wanted, but navigating across the surface of a sphere is so messy it's usually not worth the money and effort.' She'd been talking up a whirlwind, despite the croak in her voice. She certainly liked to show off, this one. 'With a sub, you don't need precise navigation: all you've got to do is make sure you end up in a wet patch. On a planet like this... what is it, eighty per cent ocean? Ninety? No problem.'

'But if that were true, then the Em- then a galactic power could conquer whole planets by warping submarines in

under the atmospheric defences. There'd be no way of stopping them. No defence.'

Summerfield had nodded. Too enthusiastically for Pupp's liking. 'How do you think Earth Central gets away with it? Most of the smaller Space Fleet vessels are designed to function underwater. Trust me. I know these things.'

How do you know? Pupp had wondered. His face must have given him away, because Summerfield had shrugged again. 'My father told me,' she'd said. 'Look, can I have a drink? All this extrapolation is murder on my larynx.'

No way of stopping them. No defence.

It could all have been a bluff, of course. The prisoner might have been briefed to spread more panic and confusion among the Tylerkind. After all, Pupp had never heard of a warp drive being fitted to anything other than a space vessel...

...but then, that was the point, wasn't it? The Empire was counting on no one expecting an aquatic attack. And what was that Summerfield had said about her father? Was that important? A clue? She'd spoken of aliens, down at the centre of the planet, from some bizarre culture in another galaxy. There were those reports, the ones he himself had stamped and filed a day or two ago, about some unidentified flying object spotted in the vicinity of Port Lindenbrook...

Chairman Manx's face flickered again. Briefly. Almost as an afterthought.

The prisoner was curled up on her sleeping slab, arms wrapped around her legs, eyes wide open. Pupp recognized the position as soon as he stepped into the cell. Her limbs were arranged at angles that provided the maximum possible relaxation for all her muscles. Part of the Hai Dow Chi, the yogic training the Empire put all its military students through. Pupp had read enough about Earth Central's tactics to recognize the form.

'Sit up,' he ordered.

'Simon says,' mumbled the prisoner, drowsily.

'Sit up or I'll use the electro-prods.'

'Hmm. Evidently, the local equivalent of "Simon says".' The woman uncurled her body, then slumped into a sitting position with her feet on the floor.

'We will continue the interview,' Pupp announced, determined to get the upper hand this time. 'Firstly. The bio-samples -'

'I haven't slept for days,' Summerfield droned, cutting across his sentence with a casualness that suggested years of experience in ignoring basic politeness. 'Your men won't let me rest. Every time I start dropping off, someone hammers on the door and starts shouting at me.'

'You will be allowed rest when the interview is over. Now. The samples -'

'Food and sleep deprivation,' Summerfield noted. 'I presume this is all part of the interrogation technique.'

Pupp tensed. More civil-rights talk. For the first time, he wondered whether she might be attached to one of those humanitarian groups, come to draw attention to Republican 'breeches of liberty' ...but no. Stupid idea. The Empire wouldn't waste time with that kind of thing, not when they were preparing to send in the Space Fleet submarines.

Gunboats. Not submarines. Gunboats.

'You are being treated fairly according to Republican Security Provision 37,' Pupp informed her, formally. 'You will be fed and allowed rest as the provision dictates.'

'I see. Could I have a copy of this provision, please?'

'No.'

'Why not?'

'The provision forbids it.'

'I'll take your word for it.' The prisoner leant back, stretched, and feigned a yawn. 'AH right, then. Kommander. I'll talk.'

Pupp folded his hands behind his back. 'Firstly. There were biosamples found in your bag. Explain.'

Summerfield shrugged. 'What do you want me to say? They're samples from the underworld. I wanted to take them back to the university for study. That's all.'

‘Really? Funny thing, “Professor”. On arrival at Port Lindenbrook, you didn’t apply for a bio-export licence. Illegal export of bio-stock, especially of rare or valuable genetic material, is a serious offence ‘

‘Valuable? Have your lab people analysed the DNA of those samples?’

Pupp clenched his teeth. ‘They have.’

‘And?’

‘The results were... inconclusive.’

Summerfield laughed. Pupp nearly jumped. ‘I bet they were. Tell the truth. Officer. Your lab couldn’t learn anything about the genetic structure of those samples. You couldn’t learn anything, because -’

‘Because what?’ roared Pupp. The woman had pushed him just that bit too far, he knew, but he hoped the show of temper might intimidate her a little. ‘Because this world, the world I serve like any good Republican citizen, is hollow? Because it’s full of dinosaurs? Don’t insult my intelligence, Ms Summerfield. And don’t insult my planet.’

Summerfield closed her eyes.

‘The truth,’ Pupp hissed. ‘I want the truth.’

She shook her head. ‘I’m sorry,’ she said, and she actually sounded like she meant it, for once. ‘Everything I’ve told you has been true. I know how it sounds, but there’s nothing I can do about it. Use the mind probe if you have to.’

Pupp frowned, but only inwardly. She was volunteering for the mind probe? Even if this station had actually been equipped with one, volunteering to submit to it was an extreme move to make. Even Earth used the damned machines only in cases of severe security breaches. Perhaps Summerfield had one of those neural scramblers you read about in the old spy autolits, something planted inside the skull that wiped the brain if it was exposed to probing beams. In which case, why would she want her brain wiped? Unless she knew something so important that —

Pupp caught his breath. ‘You’re hiding something,’ he babbled, before he could stop himself.

Summerfield's eyes flicked open. She looked like a rabbit caught in skidpod headlights. 'What?'

By Jodecai, yes. Pupp was right. That was what she was covering up. Not her Imperial connection — which was obvious to anyone with any sense, after all - but something far more important. There was some secret or other, locked away inside her head. A whole host of autolit clichés came to mind: agents with the blueprints of secret weapons etched into their brainstems, top-level security codes wired into carriers' DNA...

'Now I understand,' he muttered. 'Now I understand it all. I'll find it, Ms Summerfield. I'll find whatever it is you're covering up with that story. Don't you worry. If I have to take your neurosystem apart with my bare hands, I'll find it.'

'No. No, really, I don't know what you mean.' She kept shaking her head, and for the first time there was a touch of guilty panic in her voice. 'We went down into the underworld. We met Mr Misnomer. It's the truth.'

Mr Misnomer. Yes. Suppose there really was some terrible Imperial secret trapped in the woman's mind. Was it not possible that she really believed the tale, that the coded secrets of the Empire were somehow worked into her insane story? Like that old spy novel about the aliens who hid secret communications in the text of seemingly innocent human comic books...

Suddenly, Pupp saw the prisoner in an entirely different light. Imperial lapdog she might have been, but at the end of the day, she was a victim, a mere puppet whose brain had been mercilessly tampered with in the name of Earth politics. And somehow, this absurd fiction, this Mr Misnomer character, was the key to the whole mystery.

'Very well,' Pupp told her, suddenly switching to 'nice cop' mode. 'I'll listen. You were in the underworld, you say. With your friends and... and this Mr Misnomer.'

Summerfield eyed him suspiciously. 'You want me to carry on with the story?'

'Oh, yes... Professor. Carry on. It might be important, after all.'

‘Are you taking the piss?’

Pupp attempted a smile. ‘Not at all. Please. Go on.’

Summerfield sighed. ‘All right. Where was I? Oh yes. There I was, strapped to this table in the SSSSSSS submarine...’

‘Er, Chief?’

Pupp scowled, and turned. One of the constables was standing in the doorway of the cell, nervously jangling his keys in the palm of his hand. His helmet was tucked under his arm instead of being clamped to his head, giving Pupp a good view of his gormless, potato-shaped face. The man had a crew cut, or at least the nearest thing a trueblood Tyler could get to a crew cut, local hair genes being as unreliable as they were.

‘We’re busy, Constable,’ Pupp warned him.

‘Sorry, Chief. There’s a call from one of the patrol junks. Think it’s important.’ The man made a tiny nodding motion with his head, presumably his own private code for ‘I don’t want to talk about it in front of the prisoner’.

‘Damn,’ said Summerfield. ‘I was just getting warmed up.’

Still scowling with all his might, Pupp strode out of the cell, pulling the door shut behind him.

The constable shuffled his feet, in deference to Pupp’s authority. ‘They’ve found two more of ‘em,’ he reported. ‘Same area.’

For the briefest of moments, Pupp’s heart forgot how to beat properly. ‘Two more off-worlders? Like her?’

‘Don’t know, exactly. Sounds like they’re telling the same kind of story, though. They got picked up on the atoll. Probably looking for that hired junk we found. The patrol’s still on the link.’

Pupp nodded. This was all coming together. Summerfield’s accomplices, presumably carrying their own fragments of the secret code, or whatever it was they had bottled up in their heads. ‘Good. I’ll go and speak to the arresting officer. You carry on with the interview here.’

The constable blinked. ‘Chief...?’

‘She’ll just go on with her story. Constable. Record everything she says. Absolutely everything, even if it sounds ridiculous. She wants to talk. I’ve got a feeling that’s what she’s been primed to do. Just don’t expect her to make any sense. Understood?’

‘Er, right. Listen, Chief... I don’t know if you want to hear this, but I figured out where I’ve seen this woman before. Kind of looked familiar when she was brought in.’

‘You’ve seen her? When?’

‘On vidcast. Couple of months ago. There was this hearing. You know Stanturus? System out on the edge of the sector, right?’

Pupp grunted his acknowledgement. There’d been some kind of territorial dispute over a planet there, not that Tyler’s Folly had taken a lot of notice. It didn’t make much difference to Pupp whether the place was controlled by a left-wing Imperial lackey or a right-wing Imperial lackey. ‘Summerfield testified at the hearing,’ the constable went on. ‘Pretty much brought down the Thamian government while she was at it. Must have connections, I reckon.’

Brought down the...?

Dear God.

‘Just continue with the interview, Constable,’ said Pupp, somewhat stiffly. The man saluted weakly, and slapped his helmet on. Pupp marched off down the corridor, towards the room where the V-link terminals had been installed. Behind him, he heard the cell door opening, the voice of the Summerfield prisoner floating out into the corridor from the other side.

‘Oh good,’ she said, her voice dry and full of cracks. ‘A new audience. Where do you want me to take it from?’

'ESCAPE TO HORROR!'

!X examined the creature carefully. As carefully as he could, anyway, given the time he had before it started moving again. It was human - he knew enough about simian culture to tell that much at a glance. Its body and facial structure suggested female chromosomes, though humans were almost as prone to aesthetic alteration as the People themselves. The woman's clothing and hairstyle implied military training, but she was raising her arms ineffectually, as if preparing to perform a non-existent martial-arts manoeuvre.

Act/observe?

Act.

!X took a single step forward and planted his hand around the woman's neck. It was shockingly easy. She tried to fight him off, but her actions were slow and clumsy, betraying a lack of even the most basic combat skills. !X decided he'd mistaken the significance of her clothing.

Hurt/kill?

From nearby, there was the sound of grinding metal, the bolts of the bathosphere airlock being drawn back. !X wouldn't be alone with the human for long.

Hurt/kill?

'Stop this,' Fos!ca shouted, a second before she tripped over the airlock threshold and tumbled to the ground.

!X stood at the edge of the clearing in front of her, one hand around the neck of the alien woman. The scene was just as Fos!ca had seen it through the porthole, except that now the woman's eyes were starting to bulge out of her face and it looked like her tongue was trying to escape from her mouth.

!X turned his head as Fos!ca pulled herself upright. She started edging towards him, step by step.

'You don't need to do this,' she said, trying to sound calm. 'She hasn't done anything to hurt you. Let her go.'

!X didn't respond. Fos!ca made eye contact with him, staring right into those little black pinpoints, wishing she could afford to turn away. But she was really doing it, wasn't she? Trying to talk sense to one of the Truly Crazyed, just like in one of the dramas from the Do[EO]C archives. This was what barbarian cultures liked to call 'a situation'.

!X blinked, slowly and deliberately.

'Is that it?' he asked.

Fos!ca stopped moving.

'I'm sorry?' she said.

'Is that it?' repeated !X. He sounded gently curious.

Fos!ca was still a few metres away from him, and from here she could see the muscles in the human woman's neck flexing between his fingers. There was a reedy croaking sound from the back of the poor creature's throat.

Is that it? Is that all you can say? Is this unfortunate human going to... be badly hurt... because of you, because you couldn't say anything else to make it better?

'Stop it,' Fos!ca snapped. She'd noticed the adrenaline rush building up in her system, but up until now she'd assumed it was excitement, not panic. 'Stop it. You'll hurt her.'

'Kill her,' said !X.

Fos!ca felt as if someone had just punched her in the chest.

'I'll kill her, if I don't let go,' !X elaborated. 'She's already been "hurt". "Kill" is the word you're looking for.'

'Please,' said Fos!ca, but she had no breath left and it came out as little more than a sigh.

!X paused for a moment. The human stopped struggling.

Then, at last, he let go. The woman fell from his grip, and tumbled backward into the undergrowth. Fos!ca saw her hands leap up to her throat, as if touching it would make it better. !X, meanwhile, no longer seemed interested. He simply turned around and walked away, leaving the clearing between two of the giant trees.

To her shame, Fos!ca waited until he'd vanished before making any move towards the human. She knelt down by the woman's side. She knew enough about human culture to recognize the subject as young, and the unusual body piercings identified her as a member of one of those peculiar cultural tribes simian life forms always got so excited about. The woman was blinking wildly, clearly not understanding what was happening to her.

'It's all right,' soothed Fos!ca. 'You're going to be fine. There's no danger. Everything's all right.'

'Fuuuh,' croaked the woman.

Fos!ca considered holding her hand in a surrogate parent-child tactile gesture, but decided against it, as humans were famous for eating their parents on hatching. No, wait. That was the Metatraxi, wasn't it? Never mind. Keep talking. 'You're bound to experience some degree of stress and trauma. This is only natural. Really. It's quite usual for humanoids in your position to feel insecure and self-conscious, transposing the guilt of your attacker on to your own psyche.'

'#### off,' the woman grunted.

Fos!ca flinched. Before the journey had begun, God had planted cultural filters in the neural nets of both Fos!ca and !X, allowing them to understand any alien dialects they came across. Fos!ca guessed the filters had some kind of censorship function, designed to edit distressing words or phrases out of her consciousness.

'Erm,' muttered Fos!ca. 'Erm. Well... this is quite usual. Yes. You're bound to feel some level of unnecessary hostility.'

The woman sat bolt upright. Fos!ca felt herself pull away, in case the being lashed out at her.

'Who the #### was that?' the woman demanded. Her voice was hoarse, and she kept massaging her neck muscles.

'Please, don't worry about him,' Fos!ca said. 'He's mad.'

'He nearly killed me,' the woman protested. Fos!ca wasn't sure how to respond. Technically, this was true. !X had been on the brink of... hurting his victim. Terminally. But he hadn't. Fos!ca had persuaded him not to.

Or maybe he'd stopped because he'd wanted to stop. What had she read about !X, in the six hundred and seventy-two texts that had been written about him? !X always intimidated his victims, though it wasn't clear whether he did it deliberately, or whether it was a side effect of his sociopathic personality. Perhaps he hadn't intended to actually kill the woman at all. Perhaps he only wanted her to know that he *could* have killed her. As if the threat were more important than the actual act.

'Yes,' said Fos!ca, uncertainly. 'I'm afraid so.'

It wasn't a cell. It was an airlock.

The chamber was small, big enough for two sofas and an armchair, though this was academic as there were no furnishings here at all. Lucretia always measured things in terms of furniture, for some reason; another sign of a horribly over-ordered mind, she supposed. The walls of the airlock were a metallic blue in colour, with two great circular hatches set into the walls, one to her left, one to her right. Lucretia lay on her back, pretending the hard metal floor was doing wonders for her vertebrae, and staring at the ventilator shaft in the ceiling above her. It was covered by a perforated panel, about sixty centimetres wide and thirty across, next to which some words had been written in military stencil.

THIS SHAFT TO BE USED FOR VENTILATION ONLY
USB AS A METHOD OK ESCAPE. IS STRICTLY
PROHIBITED. ANY SMALL PRISONERS ATTEMPTING
EXIT THROUGH THIS SHAFT WILL BE TRIED
ACCORDING TO ARTICLE 26B OF THE MILITARY
SECURITY CODE OF SMARLEY'S WORLD.

In a conventional spacecraft, Lucretia reasoned, the vent would be used to pump air in and out of the chamber for various incomprehensible reasons to do with pressure and atmospheric density. This wasn't a spacecraft, though. People who built spacecraft always made them look shiny and sleek.

This place was grubbier, more mechanical. Like an old ocean liner.

Or a submarine? If it was, the vent would be used for filtering out the water. She reasoned that the vent had been attached to the internal air supply for her convenience. Then again, Lucretia was rubbish at reasoning things. She'd failed Conventional Logic on five separate occasions in kindergarten.

She gave up on the 'how do I get out of here?' question after twenty futile seconds, and concentrated on 'how did I get here?' instead. The last thing she remembered was being stapled to an operating table, being forced to confront the sheer bloody horror of her own face. No, wait. The last thing she remembered was being dragged along a series of identical metal corridors, being held by figures who felt clammy and cold, and who kept shouting 'Schnell! Schnell!' at her. The only physical evidence she had for any of these memories was a series of pink scratches along her arm, where she'd apparently been scraped and probed by medical instruments.

Well, whoever they were, at least she'd got her dufflecoat back. She was still wearing the hospital gown, the one that left her knees bare and let the universe see how big and unsightly her feet were, but the dufflecoat was now wrapped firmly around her shoulders. She had dim memories of arguing with a figure dressed in black, telling him that if she didn't get her coat back she'd get nervous and start to wee all over the place. That must have convinced him.

Abruptly, the locking wheel at the centre of the left-hand airlock began to turn. There was a heavy groaning sound, then a rush of excited air molecules. Lucretia closed her eyes and pretended to be asleep. No, hold on. That way, she wouldn't know who was coming in. OK, then she'd leave her eyes open... no, wait... right. She'd leave her eyes half open and half closed, so she'd look like she was asleep, even though in fact... Oh, shit.

There were three figures standing in the hatchway, and all of them were, to some degree, surprising. The two at the back were dressed in identical uniforms, and their faces were so

alike that Lucretia guessed they were either brothers or both members of an extremely exclusive I-Look-Like-A-Shaved-Weasel club. Their clothes were rubber, speckled with silver studs and insignia. Lucretia had seen people dressed like this before, but only in the bondage clubs of Sarah-361. However, the people there had either enormous biceps or gargantuan bosoms, unlike these two, who looked a bit sad and pathetic by comparison. Admittedly, they were also carrying big guns, which made them look a tiny bit more serious.

If the two uniformed men were odd, the figure in front of them was downright ludicrous. He was tall, tanned, and built like a tree trunk with teeth. Perfect, white, slightly-too-sharp teeth. He looked like a great gay icon, though possibly a great gay icon on a bad day.

The uniformed men nudged him in the back with the tips of their rifles. 'In,' one of them demanded.

The muscled man slouched forward, surveying the chamber with disdain. Lucretia couldn't fail to notice the way he eyed up the vent shaft. 'An airlock?' he queried.

'Ja,' the second soldier said, in a fashion you could only describe as jolly. 'Any trouble from you, and... whoosh! Out you go.'

He and his comrade laughed. Their prisoner nodded. 'Psychological device,' he said, more to himself than anyone else. 'Typical Nazi terror tactic. And a submarine disguised as a plesiosaurus. I detect the hand of the villainous Doktor Wilhelm Fetsch in all of this. Biosurgeon, gene-snatcher and mad submarine designer extraordinaire. Our paths have crossed before.'

'But how can we foil this evil fascist plot?' Lucretia heard herself ask. She wasn't sure why she'd said it. Seemed to fit the situation, really.

Mister Muscle noticed her for the first time. 'I don't give a toss,' he said. 'Just as long as I can get out of this without having my arse shot off.'

‘Pigs! Hyenas!’ The second Nazi looked like he wanted to take off one of his gloves and slap someone around the face with it. ‘You-will-never-leave-this-ship-alive!’

The airlock shook.

‘Wah,’ said Lucretia, as she rolled on to her front. The floor had shifted at an angle of about forty degrees; now, slowly, it began to right itself. From somewhere nearby, Lucretia heard the sounds of a scuffle. There was a noise that, to her imaginative ears, sounded a lot like a fascist being hit in the face with the butt of a rifle.

Lucretia clambered up off the floor, and looked around. One of the uniformed men was on his knees, his hand clutching his broken nose, blood dripping on to the floor from his face. The other was still standing. Mr Macho held one of the soldiers’ rifles, and was busy thumping the man with it. The man looked surprised and more than a little upset.

‘Come on,’ the icon hissed over his shoulder.

‘Who, me?’ said Lucretia.

‘Yes, you,’ the icon grumped, as a handful of teeth popped out of the soldier’s head. ‘Christ. Not *another* dumb sidekick.’

It was at this precise point that Lucretia remembered where she’d seen the man before. She would have gasped in astonishment, but then the sub shook again. Everyone in the airlock who was still standing promptly fell over.

Everyone in the room promptly fell over. Above her head, Bernice saw the mad doctor lose his grip on his genoelectrical flesh-wrangler. There was a blur of white as he tumbled away from the operating table, and the sound of a monocle breaking against the floor. Without warning, the light bulb above Bernice’s head went out. The room was plunged into the kind of total darkness that people who live in electricity-based cultures tend to forget even exists.

‘Kommander?’ she heard the doctor say. ‘Der lights -’

‘We’re under attack,’ the *kommander* snapped. ‘Quickly. Hold the prisoner.’

Hold the prisoner? Funny thing to say. She was electro-clamped to the table, after all -

Electro-clamped.

A-ha.

Bernice strained at the metal rings holding her wrists. They dutifully snapped open. Now the power had gone off, there was nothing to stop her palling the clamps apart. She sat upright, fumbled around until she located the manacles on her ankles, and prised them open as well.

A pair of sweaty hands reached out of the darkness, very nearly managing to grope her. Bernice pushed herself in the other direction, only to fall off the operating slab. The thump as she hit the floor was disguised by a booming impact against the hull of the submarine. The vessel shook again. Bernice rolled backward, and crashed into what she guessed was a trolley full of medical equipment.

‘Well?’ snapped the *kommander*, elsewhere in the darkness.

‘Ach! The prisoner, Mein Kommander. She has escaped.’

‘Then find her! Find her! Quickly!’

Bernice listened carefully. The *kommander*’s voice came from somewhere on the other side of the room. Now, she really had no idea how big this room was, or where the exits might have been. However, in her experience, evil masterminds had a habit of hanging around in half-lit doorways, hovering ominously. *Ergo*, it stood to reason - admittedly, a particularly frayed and disjointed kind of reason - that if she headed in his general direction, she’d find a way out.

She picked herself up, aimed herself for a point she estimated to be about seventy centimetres to the *kommander*’s right, and hurtled across the room.

‘What was that?’ hissed Kommander Katastrophen.

The *doktor* paused for thought. ‘It sounded, Mein Kommander, like someone running into a metal wall at high velocity. Ja?’

Something warm brushed past Katastrophen’s arm. He thought he heard a small voice in the darkness saying

‘rugged’, or something like that, before the sensation passed away. In a second, his hand was on his Luger.

‘The door -’ he began.

Then the emergency lighting came on, smothering the experimentation room in a dull red glow. Naturally, there was no real reason for the emergency lighting to be an unusual colour, but when the *doktor* had designed the sub, Katastrophen had insisted that the crew should really *know* when the backup generators were on line.

Katastrophen scanned the room. The chamber was a mess, the floor covered in glinting scalpels and suchlike, most of which had fallen from the overturned trolley. Doktor Felisch stood by the operating table, his paper mask still covering most of his fat old face, a confused look in his eyes. There was no sign of Professor Summerfield.

The *kommander* swung around, to face the doorway that led out into the corridor, seventy centimetres to his left. He’d been hanging around in the half-lit doorway, hovering ominously, as befitted a man in his position. The corridor outside was illuminated by the same wash of red light. Hurling along it was a pink blur topped by a mop of dark hair.

Katastrophen raised his Luger and fired, hoping to catch the escaping prisoner’s knee, or at the very least blow a couple of her toes away. The shot went wild and ricocheted off the walls. The professor reached the open hatchway at the far end of the corridor, ten metres up ahead, then vanished into the darkness on the other side.

Katastrophen cursed in colourful Germanglish. There was no point giving chase, not with the old wound in his leg still playing up. Leaving the *doktor* to clear up his instruments of genetic torture, he limped out of the room and into the corridor, thumping his fist against the communications box fixed to the wall. It whistled annoyingly as a channel to the bridge was opened.

‘Katastrophen to bridge,’ he hissed. ‘What is your situation?’

The sub lurched again.

‘We think we’re under attack, sir,’ replied one of the men on the bridge. ‘Explosive charges, we reckon. We can’t see any other vessels, though -’

‘Current location?’

The man paused. ‘We’re still in the tunnels, sir. Depth of about... uhh...’ The voice became muffled, the man holding his hand over the speaker. ‘What’s that in leagues, Fritz...? No, stop messing about. It’s the *kommander* asking...’

‘Never mind,’ Katastrophen snapped. The underworld, they’d discovered, was riddled with underwater passages, cavernous tunnels between the unlikely land masses on the inside of Tyler’s Folly. When the sub had descended through the fissure in the world above, they’d soon worked out the best route through the caves, but they hadn’t counted on coming across any hostile native life. These are my orders. It is vital we resurface at the nearest opportunity, for damage assessment and repairs. Also, an escaped prisoner is at liberty inside this vessel. Have every level searched, starting with C deck. The prisoner is unarmed, but has a finely honed sense of irony. She is to be taken alive. I repeat, she is to be taken alive.’

‘Sir.’ The communicator crackled. The sub shook again. ‘Uh, sir? Our scanning systems... to tell what... ing to get...’

‘You’re breaking up. Repeat.’

‘I said, we’re starting to get a fix on what’s hitting us, sir. Our scanning systems... picking up small objects outside the sub. Detonating... impact with the hull. Damage is... ing to look pretty bad, sir. We’re picking up leaks on D deck, and our central warp coil... completely *kaputzel* -’

‘Objects? What objects?’ There was no reply. Katastrophen raised his voice. ‘Answer me. What kind of charge is the enemy using?’

‘They’re not charges, sir,’ mumbled the voice from the bridge. The man sounded almost embarrassed. ‘They’re shellfish. We’re being attacked with exploding shellfish.’

**'ESCAPE TO HORROR!
(SLIGHT RETURN!)**

'Where's he gone?' asked Ash.

The two of them were inside the sphere now. The female alien - the one with the skin the colour of cocktail olives and the microfilament beehive hairdo - had introduced herself as Fos!ca. Helpfully, she'd spelt it out on the screen of Ash's palmtop, using English letters. The exclamation mark was pronounced as an annoying little clicking sound, apparently. The other alien, the mad one, had a name that was nothing *but* an annoying little clicking sound.

Ash had been standing in front of the forward porthole for the last five minutes, Fos!ca having quietly folded herself into a leatherette chair behind her.

'You mean !X?' Fos!ca said. 'He's gone to survey the territory.'

'Is that a good idea?'

'Oh, yes. This is a potentially dangerous environment.'

'No, what I meant was, should you be letting him run around on his own like that?'

The blank expression on Fos!ca's face congealed into a puzzled frown. 'I don't understand.'

Ash clicked her tongue, but the noise probably sounded like a proper noun in Fos!ca's language. 'Let me get this right. You say you and him were sent here, yeah? Sent here by who?'

'God.'

Oh dear. 'Right. OK, we'll put that aside for a moment. You said your People detected some anomaly or other on this planet, and wanted to investigate it. Which, to me, sounds like a serious and potentially dangerous mission.'

Fos!ca shrugged. Her costume shifted nervously across her shoulders. 'That's what doesn't make sense to me,' Ash continued. 'If the mission's so important, why send a psychopath and a psychiatrist to do the job? I mean, no offence, but isn't there someone a bit more qualified?'

'It's good therapy,' Fos!ca told her, confidently.

Ash sucked her lip. Were Fos!ca's people insane, or did they simply have a culture so different (indifferent?) that they saw nothing wrong with letting homicidal maniacs loose like this?

Maybe they were just very, very relaxed. Genetically relaxed, even. Yeah, that made a kind of sense. If these People existed in a post-scarcity zero-conflict society, as Fos!ca had hinted, they might not understand the concept of 'serious' at all. They might treat everything like a leisure pursuit. In which case, misfits like Mr Clicky-Sound would be the only links they had to their pre-scarcity brutalist era. Ha-hah! Neuroseismology in action. OK, Ash, good theory. Work with it.

'All right, let me ask you this,' she tried. 'When you told me about your... worldsphere...?' Fos!ca nodded. 'When you told me about your worldsphere, you said it was a hollow shell with a sun in the middle. Like this place.' Ash indicated the world outside the porthole. 'So that can't be a coincidence, can it? From what you said, you people don't get out much. But it just so happens that the one world in this galaxy you decide to investigate turns out to look like yours.'

Fos!ca shook her head. 'Oh, no. There can't be any connection. If there was, God would have told us about it.'

God, again. Ash remembered what the textbooks had to say about this kind of thing. According to the Rodenberry-Harrison model of xenosociology, 'God' was the name given by primitive people to the insane alien supercomputer that secretly ruled their planet from its concealed bunker while keeping them in fear and ignorance. 'And do you worship this... God?' Ash asked, cautiously.

'Of course not. Well, the Unnecessary Religions Interest Group does, but no one knows why.' Clearly, Fos!ca felt there

was nothing more to be added, as she looked down at her lap and started humming. As she hummed, there was a tiny crackling sound from the porthole, where a couple of the fracture lines in the glass were miraculously healing themselves. ‘Repairs,’ explained Fos!ca, in mid-hum.

Repairs. Fos!ca had said, when they’d boarded the ship, that she’d wanted to finish fixing the damage, but...

‘You didn’t do anything,’ Ash protested. ‘You just sat there humming.’

‘I was singing to the ship,’ replied Fos!ca. She sounded slightly hurt, as if Ash’s comment had been a criticism of her singing voice.

Ash didn’t know where to begin. ‘The ship. It’s... alive?’

Fos!ca had to think about that. ‘Is it?’

‘What do you mean, “is it”? Don’t you know?’

‘No. The ship acts like it’s alive. But I don’t know if it really is.’

Culturally different, or merely mad? That’s the subject of debate in our live studio discussion tonight. ‘Then why,’ began Ash, then gagged on the stupidity of the question and had to start again. ‘Then why, exactly, are you singing to it?’

‘If it strikes us as being alive, we should treat it in a manner befitting a living thing.’ Fos!ca lowered her voice. ‘Personally, I don’t think it’s a living organism at all. I think it’s just got a very advanced suspensor-field self-repair mechanism.’

‘Why are you whispering?’

‘It might hear us.’

‘I don’t believe it,’ Ash muttered. ‘I don’t bloody believe any of it.’

‘Oh, don’t worry about that,’ said Fos!ca, cheerfully. ‘Denial is a predictable reaction in any humanoid life form undergoing post-traumatic stress.’

* * *

Bernice turned the corner of the dull red-tinted corridor, and found herself at the end of another dull red-tinted corridor. Depressingly, this was the fifth time it had happened. Either this sub was a damn sight bigger on the inside than on the

outside, or the architecture had been specially designed to confuse the pants off you.

She stopped to take stock, nearly falling AOT as another impact rocked the sub. To her left, there was a doorway leading to a stairwell, a half-lit shaft fitted with the kind of metal staircase that was guaranteed to go 'clang' if you so much as breathed on it. By the doorway, a speaker was set into the wall, with a large plastic button beneath it. A communications unit, Bernice surmised. Next to the unit was a large letter C in military stencil.

Oh, what the hell, she thought. They can only capture me and tie me up again. She bashed the plastic button.

'Calling the bridge!' she said. 'Come in, bridge!'

There was a brief pause before the speaker started crackling at her. 'Hello?' said a slightly puzzled Germanic voice.

'I'm at the stairwell on deck C,' she barked. 'How do I get to the airlock?'

'Airlock on deck A,' replied the voice, automatically. Then another pause. 'Erm, who exactly...?'

'Ta,' said Bernice. and scurried up the staircase.

There are times, she thought, when I really love authoritarian military hierarchies. You just can't get away with this kind of thing in a self-willed free-thinking society.

Fifteen seconds and a large amount of clang-clang-clanging later, she reached the top of the stairwell. She almost felt like shouting 'taa-daaaah!' as she burst into the passage of deck A. Instead, she made a horrible little grunting sound as something smacked her in the face.

'Oh, well done,' said a voice so dark and sarcastic that it could only have belonged to Mr Misnomer.

'Look, I thought it was going to be another soldier, OK?' whined a voice Bernice found slightly-but-not-very familiar.

Bernice hauled herself up off the floor. The corridor on A deck was identical to the ones on C deck, lit by the same red glow. Two figures were standing in front of her, both clutching SSSSSSS-issue rifles. The female figure was

holding hers the wrong way round, having just used the blunt end to smack Bernice in the chops.

‘Oh, it’s you,’ Bernice mumbled, rubbing her jaw.

‘Um. Hello, Professor.’ Lucretia lowered the gun. ‘Sorry.’

Mr Misnomer nudged Bernice aside, heading for the door to the stairwell. A current of air, laced with male superhero sweat, wafted unpleasantly past Bernice’s nostrils. ‘Happy reunions later. You can knock each other senseless then. Right now, we’ve got to get to the bridge.’

Bernice restrained him with a hand on his shoulder. He shrugged her off, but at least he stopped. ‘What do you mean, the bridge?’

‘Always take out the nerve centre,’ Mr Misnomer explained, not at all patiently. ‘I came here to put a stop to the relentless advance of evil, remember?’

Bernice rolled her eyes. ‘We’re on a ship full of tooled-up fascist fundamentalists. What exactly did you have in mind?’

Mr Misnomer didn’t speak. He just nodded towards his rifle.

‘Oh, charming,’ said Bernice. ‘I thought you never killed except in self-defence.’

‘You don’t call this self-defence?’

‘Look, can we just get out of here?’ whined Lucretia. ‘If they find us here, they’ll throw us out the airlock.’

‘We’re heading out of the airlock,’ Bernice announced. ‘The emergency lighting’s on. That means we’re going to have to surface, if we haven’t surfaced already. So we want to get to the airlock before anyone else does. We are not - repeat, not - taking on the whole crew. Got it?’

Mr Misnomer glared at her.

‘Good,’ said Bernice.

‘Y’know, you two sound so much alike when you get annoyed,’ mused Lucretia.

‘Oh, don’t worry about that,’ Fos!ca was saying. ‘Denial is a predictable reaction in any humanoid life form undergoing post-traumatic stress.’

!X hovered at the edge of the clearing, watching the bathosphere from the shadows beneath one of the half-fallen trees. There was no sound from the sphere, but he could read the lips of the two subjects through the porthole, and the cultural filter did the rest.

The human said something obscene. !X began to wonder if the conversation had reached the end of its usefulness.

Move/wait?

He crept away from the clearing, disappearing into the thick of the jungle between two of the mutant redwoods. He turned his thoughts to Fos!ca as he went, letting a near-infinite array of instinct protocols guide him through the undergrowth and process the mass of sensory data around him. Naturally, !X had run a number of psychological and physiological tests on Fos!ca before he'd killed her - that is to say, before he'd killed the version of her that had lived in Paradise, the version that, in !X's view, really mattered - so he knew what to expect from her. When he'd shown *this* version her own corpse, he'd effectively wired a whole network of minor mortality anxieties into her neurosystem, a chain of neuroses that could be easily triggered by simple emotional stimuli. A good start to their relationship, but !X was unsure how to build on it.

He knew God had quite specific reasons for letting him visit this planet, and he suspected he knew what those reasons were. But the conclusion... If he only knew how God had intended the situation to resolve itself, he'd know how best to deal with Fos!ca.

Kill/integrate?

Without warning, !X's survival protocols instructed his body to begin manufacturing a number of basic adrenaline variants. He stopped moving.

There was another intelligence here. Deep inside !X's metabolism, enzymes were turning chemical loop-the-loops, responding to the touch of a second biological presence. It wasn't telepathy. Telepathy is a mental process, and the reactions going on inside !X were occurring inside every part

of his body. The proximity of like minds, triggering off hormonal fireworks.

Something hurled itself from a branch above !X's head, hooked itself around a second branch, cast a broad shadow over him as it moved away. He caught a glimpse of lithe muscles and dark fur. The shape vanished into the depths of the jungle, the branches shaking noisily in its wake.

In the Chamber, the thirteen oldest creatures in the world opened their eyes and looked at each other. Their pupils were dilated. Nobody wanted to be the first to speak.

'He saw us,' die Youngest finally volunteered.

'Don't be ridiculous,' snapped another, angrier member of the assembly. 'He saw one of the ones-who-fly, that's all. The thing must have been making too much noise in the trees. Probably scratching at pubic lice.'

The Eldest of the Eldest spoke. 'No. The Youngest is right. We looked at him, and he looked back at us.' She sounded tired, but almost relieved. 'He knows,' she concluded.

The airlock was small and spotless, its aesthetic of simplicity ruined only by the two unconscious SSSSSSS stormtroopers sprawled out across the floor. Bernice guessed they weren't part of the original fixtures and fittings. She stepped politely over them while Lucretia resealed the interior hatch.

'We've surfaced,' Bernice confirmed, after reading the pressure gauge on the exterior hatch. 'I'm not too sure about some of the readings on this, though. Maybe it's just this Inner World place -'

'Can we get out of here, please?' suggested Lucretia. 'I think I can hear soldiers running up the corridor.'

'The airlock's soundproofed,' Mr Misnomer pointed out.

'So I'm paranoid,' muttered Lucretia.

Bernice twisted the opening wheel. The outer hatch swung open with a satisfying hydraulic hiss. Bernice spotted a tiny speaker set into the frame of the hatch, and realized the hiss was a sample, a recording activated by the opening

mechanism, just for effect. When the SSSSSSS built a submarine, they *really* built a submarine.

Bernice's nostrils twitched as damp, fetid air flooded into the chamber, and she heard Lucretia make a sound that was something like 'poo'. Bernice stepped forward, poking her head out of the side of the sub.

The vessel had surfaced inside a cavern. The place was huge, the walls unnaturally smooth. A natural formation originally, Bernice guessed, but one that had been customized by intelligent or semi-intelligent life forms over the years. The floor of the cavern was easily a hundred metres from side to side, and almost entirely covered with stagnant water. An underground reservoir - again, a natural feature. The walls were ringed with galleries and pockmarked with tunnel openings, many of them set into the rock high above the surface of the reservoir, clearly signs of primitive civilization. Flaming torches had been set into small cubbyholes at strategic points, the firelight reflecting against the surface of the water, filling the air with a damp yellow light that made Bernice think of old pubs, for some reason.

There were also people. Lots of people. Hunched humanoid shapes, squatting on the rock ledges, wading in the shallower waters at the edges of the cavern, peering out from the tunnel openings. Bernice thought of *The Time Machine* and shivered.

Something nudged her back. Bernice squawked, loudly. Around the cavern, the humanoids shifted uneasily, and made a variety of low grunting noises.

'Sorry,' squeaked Lucretia.

The submarine had surfaced at the side of the cave, so the hatchway wasn't more than a metre or two from one of the lower ledges. Jumping distance. A few of the man shapes were approaching along that ledge, but they looked apprehensive, cluttering together in little defensive packs, the way university students did when walking home from a nightclub in a rough part of town. Their skulls were chunky, with huge, hairy brows and deep-set eyes. Their jaws jutted forward, making them look clinically confused. Their skins were tanned and oily, their bodies hunched, wrapped up in

simple animal skins. Oddly, the two nearest Bernice were both carrying shellfish.

‘Cavemen,’ whispered Lucretia over Bernice’s shoulder.

‘Gugs,’ hissed Bernice. ‘There were descriptions of them in Kryptosa’s journal. They’re one of two cultured tribes living down here.’

“‘Cultured’?” queried Mr Misnomer.

‘They’ve got clothes on, haven’t they?’

She turned to face the two nearest figures on the ledge. They’d stopped moving, and were listening intently to Bernice’s words. Their language is probably very simple, Bernice told herself. To them, a complex multi-tasked language like English must sound like a stream of white noise.

She held up her hands, hoping the gesture had the same cultural significance for humanoid the universe over. ‘Peace,’ she said. ‘We come in peace. We mean you no harm. You Gugs, yes? Gugs.’

All around the cavern, the shadowy cave people stirred, and muttered quietly among themselves. Some of them looked like they were nodding. Good sign. Bernice decided to take a risk. She took a couple of steps back into the airlock, then launched herself forward, hurling herself out of the hatch and on to the ledge. The two nearest Gugs backed away a little, and as she hit the ledge Bernice tried to ignore the fact that she’d just sliced her bare feet open on the rock. The Gugs, she noticed, were wisely wearing mammoth-skin shoes.

Recovering her posture, she started to walk along the ledge. The Gugs looked at each other for support, but stood their ground. Bernice came to a halt in front of them. Close enough for intimate discourse, not close enough to invade their personal space. Hopefully.

‘We are travellers,’ she told them. ‘Front the surface world. The surface world. Yes?’ She made appropriate gestures with her hands.

‘Gug,’ declared one of the Gugs.

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘Gug,’ said the Gug. ‘Gug gug. Gug-gug-gug. Gug.’

‘Ah. Yes. That is a simple language, isn’t it? Never mind. We come in peace, that’s the main thing. Look.’ She held out her hand. The Gugs shuffled nervously for a moment, then saw that the hand was empty.

Slowly, the Gug who’d spoken started to reach out for it.

‘Gug,’ said the Gug. ‘Gug gug. Gug.’ His fingers brushed Bernice’s. They were soft and warm.

‘That’s right,’ said Bernice, encouragingly. She hoped the Gug wouldn’t feel patronized. ‘Friends. Be friends.’

‘Gug. Gug gug gug.’

‘Yes. Friends.’

‘Gug. Gug gug gug gug. Gug-gug. Gug. We’ll be back after this short break. Gug.’

Bernice’s jaw dropped open.

A deafening clang rang out through the cavern.

Then a lot of things happened at once.

Around the cave, the Gugs started to grunt and chatter in their dozens. Behind Bernice, there was a fleshy crunching noise as Lucretia leapt from the hatch and landed on the ledge. From the sub itself, there was a cry of warning from Mr Misnomer. There were also footsteps. Jackboots on metal.

‘Gug!’ roared the talkative Gug. Bernice whirled around, in time to see Mr Misnomer leap with puma-like grace from the hatchway and land on the rock ledge mere centimetres from where Lucretia was picking herself up and going ‘ow, my bloody legs’. And there was gunfire. Bullets hit the walls of the cavern overhead, forcing the Gugs to clutch their ears in horror. Half a dozen black-uniformed figures appeared in the hatchway, brandishing well-polished fake antique rifles.

Up above, a group of Gugs standing in a tunnel entrance started jumping up and down, swinging their arms to frighten off the intruders. Bernice could see them picking up rocks, ready to throw. The soldiers in the hatchway saw it too. Those at the front raised their weapons.

‘No!’ she shouted. ‘Don’t -’

More gunfire. The cavern became an echo chamber full of loud bangs and prehistoric screeches. Somewhere nearby, a

chorus of voices was chanting, 'Gug - Gug - Gug - Gug.' Bernice couldn't work out if the SSSSSSS men were still firing, or if the cracks and bangs were just after-echoes.

Mr Misnomer ran into her. 'Move,' he said.

Bernice was shunted forward, towards the two nearest Gugs. Neither of them took any notice of her. Each one was swinging his shellfish, like a small smelly bolas, preparing to make a throw at the sub. The poor creatures, Bernice thought, they don't understand that it takes more than seafood to take out a whole submarine.

The shellfish flew from the Gugs' hands. The projectiles arced through the air. Bernice was pushed past the fish-hurlers, knocking them aside and careering along the ledge.

The explosion, when it came, was loud enough to shake the cavern. Bernice very nearly lost her footing. She looked back over her shoulder. The metal around the sub's hatch was horribly mangled, and even now stunned (or dead?) SSSSSSS troops were toppling out of the airlock, landing in the shallow waters below. Those at the rear looked thoroughly bewildered.

Exploding shellfish? thought Bernice.

And 'We'll be back after this short break'?

Fos!ca ran her hand across the hull of the bathosphere. All the rivets had miraculously reappeared in the outer framework, and the metal panels had popped themselves back into place. She was sure the vehicle had even taken on a kind of happy sheen, as if someone had crept into the clearing and polished it while she hadn't been looking.

'It's ready,' she said. 'We can leave at any time.'

By her side, the human called Ash looked dubious. 'How can you tell?'

'It's glowing.'

'It's what?'

'Glowing. It looks well.'

Ash shook her head. Fos!ca had no idea where the human was getting all this unhealthy cynicism from. Probably something endemic in barbarian culture, something that

refused to let the poor things believe anything could run smoothly.

Was this mission running smoothly, then? Would the Do[EO]C have been proud of her? Would God?

‘So, what do we do now?’ Ash asked.

Fos!ca scratched her chin. That was what humans did, she understood, when they wanted to look thoughtful, and she hoped Ash would appreciate the gesture. ‘We complete the investigation into this planet’s anomalous gravitational conditions. We’ll find !X first, to see if he’s finished scouting out the terrain.’

‘If he hasn’t got himself killed,’ Ash murmured. ‘Is he armed?’

‘Of course not. Why would we arm someone who was mad? That would be stupid.’

Ash looked like she was biting her lip. ‘Of course. Silly me. Look, all I’m saying is, there are things in this jungle that’ll more than likely want to rip his head off. Including me, come to think of it.’

‘Er...’ began Fos!ca, but really, she had no idea how to answer that.

Fortunately - from the point of view of protocol, at least - it was at precisely this moment that something large, hairy and roughly man-shaped dropped out of the trees and threatened to kill them both.

'EXPEDITION OF THE DAMNED!'

By the time Kommander Ernst Katastrophen reached the airlock, it was all over. That, he reminded himself, was the right of the commanding officer: to get to the battle slightly too late to actually be of any use.

He descended the boarding ladder his men had constructed outside the hatchway, sniffing the air distastefully as he limped on to the rock ledge. The cavern had a kind of abattoir-like tang to it, and, not for the first time since he'd arrived on this planet, Katastrophen found himself reminiscing about life in the hell camps of Darvilleva-Q. There were swirls of pink in the murky water, where the bodies of barbaric cave people and noble SSSSSSS shock troops had fallen. Primitive corpses could be seen sprawled across the higher ledges.

'Report,' he snapped to the lieutenant by his side. Just to push home his sense of urgency, he rapped his walking cane against the ledge. Pleasingly, the lieutenant jumped.

'Eleven dead on our side, sir,' he said, saluting for no given reason. 'We're still counting the cave people.'

'Eleven?' That was... disturbing. The submarine had a crew complement of only twenty-four, Katastrophen and Doktor Fetisch included. If almost half of his unit had been murdered by these savages, then... well, it didn't do much for the SSSSSSS's claims for Aryan supremacy, for a start.

'The men were caught off guard, sir,' the lieutenant reported. 'Five died in the first, er, blast. Another three fell from the hatch and were clubbed to death in the water, we think. The rest died in face-to-face battle. Rifles versus shellfish. Sir.'

Katastrophen nodded grimly. 'An honourable way to die. Have all the primitives been exterminated?'

'No, sir. Most of them ran off into the tunnels when the fight started. We don't think they'll be back.'

'Feel better now, do we?' said a voice.

The sarcasm was unmistakable. Katastrophen whirled around on his one good leg. Summerfield was standing on the ledge a few metres away, at the entrance to one of the side tunnels, where they'd no doubt been hiding during the battle. Her two companions stood behind her. All three were carrying guns, looted from the bodies of fallen SSSSSSS men. Summerfield looked resolute. The man with the ludicrous musculature looked bored. The girl looked like she needed to use the toilet.

'Professor Summerfield,' said Katastrophen, levelly. 'So. You have, at least, the dignity to show yourself.'

'Good grief, you people are ridiculous,' slurred the professor. 'Look at you. You've just committed mass slaughter against the local population -'

'Subhumans. They attacked us. We defended ourselves. A simple law of nature.'

'They didn't "attack" you. They just dropped a few shellfish bombs down into the water. They must have been hunting for giant coelacanth or something. They weren't expecting a big metal lizard full of little Hitlers.'

Katastrophen scowled. 'Much as I'd love to continue this discourse in morality. Professor, I have very little time. You will be returned to your cell on board the submarine, to await the conclusion of the doktor's experiments.'

Summerfield stared at him for a while before speaking.

'I'm sorry,' she said. 'I am actually pointing a rifle at you. I mean, I can't say I'm really comfortable holding it, but it's better than... well, not holding it. At this juncture. If you see what I mean.'

'Well said,' the man grunted. Katastrophen was amazed to hear that his sense of sarcasm was even more bloated than the professor's.

‘True,’ Katastrophen said. ‘But there are only three of you. In this cavern alone, there are twice as many of my men, and all of them are practised marksmen.’ This was true. Well, the first part was true. Half a dozen of the surviving SSSSSSS men were scattered around the ledges and tunnel entrances, picking through the primitive corpses, looking for gold teeth and all the usual things troops did when given a crack at dead bodies. As soon as Summerfield and her companions had appeared, the men had trained their rifles on them. Katastrophen could practically smell the sweat forming on the soldiers’ trigger fingers.

Summerfield sighed. ‘Yes, but they’re not going to shoot, are they? Because my gun’s pointing at you, and I’m just as ready to fire as they are. I don’t care how practised they are. If they open fire, you snuff it. So there.’

She looked quite smug about this, though Katastrophen felt it was a trifling point of logic. ‘You will also die,’ he pointed out.

‘Yes, I know. And I’m sure that’ll be a great consolation to you, as your cerebellum gets sprayed against the cavern wall and your hypothalamus is turned into a Polo mint.’

‘Urgh,’ said the girl.

‘So. Stalemate. Is that what you’re saying. Professor?’

Summerfield shook her head. ‘You don’t get it yet, do you? Look at your submarine.’

Katastrophen pushed his spectacles back up his face, only now realizing how sweaty his nose was, and turned. Behind him, the submarine moped in the water, its hull covered in dents. There were little bubbles in the water where air was escaping from inside the vessel. The sub’s psychoactive outer shell had turned a bright orangey pink, as if embarrassed by the damage and learning to blush.

‘Point one,’ Summerfield said. ‘I don’t seriously believe your sub’s warp drive is still functioning. That means you can’t get off-world. Point two, the thing isn’t even seaworthy. I doubt you could get it out of this cavern, let alone back to the surface. Point three, which follows on from points one and two: you’re buggered. You’ve already lost a lot of your crew

holding off a bunch of Neanderthals heavily armed with fish. You're stuck in the middle of a hostile alien environment with no apparent exit and no idea what to expect. Point four. I've read Kryptosa's journal, and you haven't.'

The *kommander's* face froze in mid-snarl. 'What are you suggesting?'

The woman gritted her teeth. Katastrophen could tell she didn't feel happy with her next sentence. 'We both want to get out of here in the smallest possible number of pieces. There's only one reasonable option.'

'Cooperation?'

Summerfield nodded slowly. 'Cooperation. Just like in *Sesame Street*. Although only on the understanding that you look like a sick newt, and that your philosophy smells of wee.'

Slowly, she began to lower her rifle. Katastrophen heard the sound of half a dozen soldiers breathing out, and smelt the tang of fingers tightening on triggers.

!X hadn't moved in nearly twenty minutes. There were still unfamiliar compounds in his blood, tiny chemical echoes of his contact with...

Theorize/speculate?

...with the intelligence that controlled this ecosystem. He was busy concentrating, instructing his glands to release antitoxins into his system, to wash out the last of the contact enzyme. He didn't want to face this environment with any impurities in his neural networks.

There was something else now, though. A recurrent sound spike, set against the constant chatter of the lizards and the insects. Footsteps. Rapid impacts. Pursuit rhythms.

'We can't outrun them,' Foslca burbled. Her voice was anxious, but steady. She'd been trained to regulate her breathing, then, even in a crisis. Useful to know.

'Any... better... ideas?' gasped the human woman who called herself Ash.

The two subjects were behind him, following the same jungle trail he'd taken away from the bathosphere, and there

were other peaks of sound beyond them. Jagged, messy vibrations. Pursuers. Running with no sense of control.

'We could talk to them. I'm fully versed in primitive psychology. I'm sure we could -'

!X turned, just as Fos!ca came into view. Ash right behind her. They skidded to a halt when they saw him, and he was satisfied to see fleeting expressions of shock on both their faces.

'Barbarians,' Fos!ca spluttered, her breath finally losing its sense of tempo. 'They're hostile

Ash grabbed her arm. 'Forget him. Keep going.'

Ash started to move again. Calmly, !X raised his hand, and held it in front of the woman's face. Instantly, she stopped.

Instinctive authority-submissive urge. Good.

!X reached out for the nearest tree. The tree was several metres in diameter, the bark a garish red in colour, its surface gnarled and covered in deep ridges. Hardwood, !X noted. He grasped the lowest branch, a thick stem protruding from the trunk just above eye level, and snapped it off.

The pursuers were close, now. !X weighed the branch in his hand, taking note of its most important attributes, its density, its tensile strength, and - for future reference - its probable ignition point. Ash and Fos!ca stared blankly at him. The human wanted to run, !X could tell, but her mammalian pack instincts were keeping her in check.

Kill/incapacitate?

The first of the primitives appeared from between two of the nearby trees. The creature was humanoid, clothed in animal skins and marked with scars !X took to be tribal identifiers. It had thick-set features, and !X was interested to see that its arm muscles were unusually well developed in comparison with the rest of its body. Almost grotesque, in fact.

The primitive let out a howl of warning, or possibly of triumph. One of its hands was raised, its fingers wrapped around a chunk of spiky black rock.

!X stepped forward and ran the branch through its chest.

It wasn't easy. The branch was hardly an ideal impaling weapon, and !X hadn't had time to even sharpen the point.

But he'd judged its physical properties well enough to know exactly what kind of pressure would be required to shatter a ribcage, and to know the angle of penetration needed to enter the primitive's heart. There was more surprise on the creature's face than pain. !X let go of the branch. The primitive fell to the ground. The sharpened rock dropped out of its hand.

'God,' !X heard Fos!ca say, somewhere in the background. 'No. No. God.'

The second of the beings was already within sight. Similar clothing, similar scarring, similar armament. !X bent down and scooped up the fallen rock, performing the action smoothly and without ceremony. If the movement appeared casual, the attacker wouldn't perceive him as anything other than a target.

Kill/incapacitate?

!X drove the rock into the creature's throat. As its jaw broke, !X noticed certain anomalies in its facial structure. Its cranium was larger than that of the first attacker, suggesting a skull deformity. Its shoulders were hunched, even for an ape descendant. This was more than genetic variation, !X deduced. Both of the beings were deformed, and the deformities didn't appear to be inherent.

That was his initial diagnosis. Admittedly, though, he had only a moment to observe the second creature's characteristics before its skull cracked open and it died.

'They're dead,' Fos!ca was saying. 'God. God They're dead.'

'Yes,' said !X.

But it's so easy. You just...' Fos!ca seemed lost for words. 'It shouldn't be that easy, should it? It shouldn't be. It can't be.'

'Bloody hell,' muttered Ash.

'But how do people stay alive, if it's that easy? How does anyone ever stay alive?' Fos!ca was babbling, which was a predictable response. She'd never seen a sentient or semi-sentient being die by violence before; almost nobody among the People had. !X reminded himself that these were the first people who'd died by his own hand, in this universe.

Then again, this wasn't the universe that mattered. This wasn't Paradise.

* * *

It was Lucretia's first look at the landscape of the underworld, and her stomach didn't know which way to lurch first. All she could think of was that moment when she'd gone back to her rooms for her scratchpad, before Katastrophen had crept out of the shadows and abducted her. The sense of something being horribly, tragically wrong somewhere. The same way she'd felt when she'd been taken to the Sarah Metropol at the age of eleven, when she'd visited Princess Alexandria Transmat Station and been swallowed up by what the newscasts now liked to call 'molecular vertigo'.

'I need to use the toilet,' she grumbled.

'You just went behind the cycads,' said Mr Misnomer.

'I don't care. I need to go again.'

Actually, she just wanted an excuse to get away from the others for a while, to get to grips with this place on her own terms. Sod it, what she really wanted was to close her eyes, cover her ears, and make 'eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee' noises until she felt better. The party was standing on a rock ledge, set against the side of a garish purple mountain, part of a range that stretched all the way to the nonexistent horizon. Lucretia could see winding, sloping pathways etched into the sides of all the peaks, the slopes spattered with random deposits of diamond. Even the mountains looked wrong here. Mountains, in Lucretia's view, were supposed to be inhospitable and snow-covered, but these were as hot as rainforests and looked like they were ripe for a service station or two.

The way out of the caves hadn't been hard to find. One of the side tunnels in the waterlogged cavern had led straight out into the sunlight, and a bunch of the space-Nazis had gone ahead, scaring off the few remaining Gugs who lurked around the passage.

Bernice was by Lucretia's side, looking up into the sky. 'I'm sure it was brighter than that before,' she said.

‘What, the sun? Maybe it’s got a dimmer switch. Professor... what’s going on here?’

Bernice blew through her lips. ‘Something suitably nasty and suspicious. I’m hoping Katastrophen’s going to give us the rest of the answers we need.’ She looked over her shoulder. By the tunnel entrance, Kommander Katastrophen was conversing in hushed tones with the insane Doktor Fetisch. The former kept giving sideways glances at Bernice and Mr Misnomer - obviously, he didn’t feel Lucretia to be dangerous enough to warrant attention (oh good, oh nuts) - while the latter was, strangely, still wearing his blood-spattered hospital apron. The SSSSSSS had given Bernice and Lucretia their proper clothes back, though Lucretia was sure they’d fitted her sneakers with some devious fascist device that made her little toes hurt.

Katastrophen broke off the conversation with a dismissive wave, and strode purposefully in their direction, maliciously striking the rock ledge with his walking cane as he went. ‘We are ready to proceed,’ he rasped. ‘Which way do we head?’

‘That all depends what we’re looking for, doesn’t it?’

Katastrophen squinted at Bernice. Suspiciously. ‘In his journal... Kryptosa did not describe his findings?’

‘He described a lot of his findings. You’re looking for something specific down here, though, aren’t you?’ Bernice refrained from folding her arms, but she still sounded like a schoolteacher. Katastrophen paused for a moment, though Lucretia wasn’t sure whether it was because he was reluctant to speak, or for dramatic effect.

‘The Holy Grail of every good National Socialist,’ he said at last, puffing out his chest. ‘The Pool of Life.’

He clearly expected them to be impressed. Lucretia just wanted to wee more.

‘Which Pool of Life would that be?’ asked Bernice.

Katastrophen hissed at her. He didn’t even bother hissing words, he just hissed generally. ‘Surely you must know, Professor? As an archaeologist, you should be familiar with the legends.’

‘Go on.’

‘The story holds that before mankind walked the Earth, the world was ruled by giants. Wonderful, Aryan creatures. Even the holy scriptures of the corrupt Christian-Jewish faiths agree on this. It is said there was a great calamity, and the giants were driven underground. The proud Aryan forefathers of the human race, the children of the original Pool of Life, still thrive at the heart of the world.’

Bernice nodded. ‘Not exactly an ancient legend, though. I mean, the myth of the Inner World is pretty old, but the idea of the giants being Aryan supermen only dates back to the 1930s. The Nazi Party’s Ancestral Research Department even talked about mounting an expedition to Tibet to find the only surviving entrance to the underworld. Goodness knows why. Still, they also funded research to prove Jesus Christ was an Aryan, so I suppose we shouldn’t be surprised. Fascist insanity is a specialist subject of mine, by the way. We’ve got that much in common.’

Katastrophen was unabashed. ‘The department had the right idea. But the legend was incomplete. For, as all educated men know, the Earth is not hollow.’ He indicated the landscape around him with a wave of his cane. ‘But this planet... When we learnt of Kryptosa’s last expedition, we knew the truth. This is the land the Third Reich sought after, where humanity itself originated.’

Bernice pursed her lips. ‘I see. All this and Erich Von Daniken, too. So. You want to find the Lost Tribe of man, I assume.’

‘Yes! The Lost Tribe, and the Pool that spawned it. The source of all Aryan life. Doktor Fetisch has proved such a thing is possible, and this world is its only feasible location.’ Katastrophen glared at Bernice. ‘Now. Kryptosa’s journal. You have read it. What does he say?’

‘Ah. Well, according to the bits we could make out, Kryptosa found two separate tribes down here. The Tribe of Lilith, who are intelligent and technologically sophisticated, and the Tribe of Gug, who go “Gug”. Your men have already begun the genocide of the latter, so presumably -’

‘The Tribe of Lilith! The custodians of the Pool! It must be so!’ Katastrophen’s eyes positively twinkled. ‘Did he describe where this tribe is to be found?’

Bernice nodded towards a nearby mountain, the next along the range. The pathway they were standing on wound around the mountain, presumably becoming a trail that led across the range. You could see the tip of the second mountain from here, but no more of it than that. ‘There’s a plateau on the other side of that mountain. And it’s inhabited. Happy?’

She turned to Mr Misnomer. ‘You. Walking sweat gland. Word in your ear.’ Then she walked off, up the pathway and away from the rest of the party. Mr Misnomer followed her, mumbling miserably.

Lucretia was left alone with Kommander Katastrophen. They stared across the landscape together for a few moments, not wanting to face each other.

‘She is... quite a woman, your friend,’ the Nazi said.

Lucretia shrugged. ‘She’s not my friend. She’s a tutor at my university.’

‘You study archaeology?’

‘Who, me? God, no. I’m in Neuroseismology.’

‘Neuro...?’

‘Neuroseismology. It’s a hyperrelative science. The study of the allegorical links between geological tectonic movements and changes in humanoid thought patterns. That’s what it says in the prospectus, anyway.’ She shrugged again, and felt the overwhelming need to apologize.

Katastrophen nodded. ‘You are all insane,’ he said, simply.

This fascinating debate was interrupted by a groaning sound from the tunnel entrance, accompanied by a barrage of German swearwords. Five of the remaining SSSSSSS men were emerging from the tunnel, dragging a startled Gug between them. Five men, one for each limb and a fifth to kick the Gug in the stomach.

‘Excellent,’ said Katastrophen, hobbling towards the struggling Gug. ‘Have you attempted to question him?’

‘Gug gug gug-gug,’ bumbled the Gug.

Lucretia skipped over to join them. 'I don't understand. What do you want with the caveman?'

'The professor may have some knowledge of this environment, Miss Scannon, but in my view there is no substitute for experience. If we can find a way of... coercing this primitive, he may make a useful guide.' The Gug was pinned to the floor now, being roundly sat on by three of the SSSSSSS soldiers, their uniforms making horrid little squeaky noises every time the Neanderthal moved. Katastrophen started running the end of his cane through the dust on the rock ledge in front of the Gug's face. Lucretia realized he was making symbols in the dirt. 'We shall try pictograms,' he said.

The *kommander* rapped his cane against the ground. The Gug stopped wriggling, and focused on the pictures. He seemed fascinated by the symbols, but didn't respond.

'Observe,' demanded Katastrophen. 'The Pool of Life. The Tribe of Lilith. Where?'

'Gug,' said the Gug.

Katastrophen squiggled another image. 'This is here. The mountain. We wish to find the Pool. You understand?'

'Gug,' apologized the Gug.

Katastrophen sighed. 'It is no use. The animal is clearly mentally deranged. He does not understand the significance of the pictures.'

Lucretia frowned. 'I'm not mentally deranged, but I don't understand the significance of the pictures, either. What's that one there?'

Katastrophen gave her a goldfish-eyed stare. 'That represents the genetically pure Aryan superman, naturally.'

'Should it have three legs?'

'That isn't a leg. Miss Scannon.'

'Um. Well. Anyway, I don't think this is working.' She knelt down by the Gug, who looked up at her curiously. Lucretia found herself thinking of chimpanzees. Chimps weren't human, either, but they fooled you into thinking they were when they looked at you. That curious, slightly puzzled expression they wore. 'We think we want to go to that

plateau,' she said, pointing to the nearest mountain. 'The plateau. You see? There.'

The Gug followed her finger. Then he let out the most heartfelt grunt imaginable, and started struggling again. There were many awkward squeakings as the Nazi writhed around on top of him, trying to get him back under control. One of the Gug's hands came free. He started to claw at the dirt.

'The creature's scared,' noted Katastrophen.

'Scared? What of?' Lucretia glanced in the direction of Bernice's theoretical plateau. 'Unless

The Gug's hand was still raking the dirt, but his hand was shaking, the SSSSSSS men trying to stamp on his wrists. Lucretia suddenly figured out what he was trying to do.

'Leave his hand alone,' she said. 'Look, he's trying to draw something. See? Leave hint.'

The soldiers stopped stomping. His hand still trembling, the Gug reached out for the nearest patch of undisturbed rock dust, and started to scratch out a series of lines. Lucretia leant forward to see what he'd drawn.

But it wasn't a picture. It was a word. A whole word, in English.

'The word was MEPHISTO.

'Gug,' elaborated the Gug.

'EVE OF EXPOSITION!'

Bernice led Mr Misnomer along the mountain path, eventually stopping in such a way as to put him between her and the rest of the party. 'Try to look like we're covertly discussing a double-cross,' she told him.

Mr Misnomer looked puzzled. It was the first time Bernice had seen that, and she liked the way his grim, hawkish features suddenly went all dopey. 'Won't that gel Katastrophen edgy?'

'No. They'll be expecting us to plot against them, it's only natural.' She slipped the palmtop out of her coat pocket. It was a sleek black Selachian model, nicked from the body of one of the stormtroopers. Bernice pointed it at the rock face of the mountain. 'I don't want them to know I've got this. There's something I want to check out. They've only been scanning the basic environmental conditions so far, but I want to try testing these rocks at an atomic level.'

'Why?'

'Because I think they've been fiddled with, that's why. I want to see if there's any traces of microlevel manipulation. Maybe something like a terraforming virus.' Bernice decided not to point out that she'd already duped the SSSSSSS once. There was nothing in Kryptosa's journal about the plateau. She'd seen the signs of life herself, from the outcrop they'd found when they'd first arrived. 'In a way, the *kommander's* probably right. There probably *is* a "Pool of Life" down here. The source of whatever's playing around with the local genetics. I saw you and the *doktor* exchanging dirty glances, by the way. You've met the SSSSSSS before, haven't you?'

Mr Misnomer shook his head. 'I've met Fetisch. He was involved with one of the big Stella Storan neo-Nazi groups in

the thirties, and he looked old then. Never heard of these SSSSSSS people before. They're babies, compared with what we had to deal with in my day. Small-time blackshirts.'

'Mmm. They're very big on genetics, though. Eugenics freaks.' Bernice impatiently tapped the screen of the palmtop. 'They've got a kind of cult following on some of the outer colonies, the places where the humans feel like they're under threat from "the alien menace". There was even an article about them in *NewLife* magazine. 'The New Human Crusader: Underdog or Ubermensch?'. Did you ever hear of the Jonson's Engine project?'

'Nope. Been out of action a while.'

'Jonson's Engine was before your era, even. Time-travel project, started by Earth admin halfway through the last century. They put together a fully functional time machine. In a research station on Vilencia Sixteen.'

Even Mr Misnomer looked surprised. 'Time Travel? I met a master criminal from the year 6060, once. But he got sucked into the space-time vortex and scattered to the temporal winds.' He frowned. 'Or was that someone else?'

'Well, anyway,' cut in Bernice. 'The project wasn't a success. But only because someone blew up the research station. And took half of die Vilencia Sixteen with it. Nothing was ever proved, although it was thought one of the big corporations was responsible. The way the corporations saw it, time travel would undermine the very fabric of the capitalist continuum. It was even rumoured that a high-powered group of businessmen had set up a secret society to monitor any time-travel developments inside Earthspace, to make sure the economy wasn't damaged. They called themselves the Time-and-Motion Lords. They say that's why the human race didn't officially invent time travel until the fiftieth century.' Oh, crumbs, that'd been a slip. Still, Misnomer didn't seem fazed.

'But?' he prompted. 'I'm assuming there'll be a but.'

'But, even though the project was wrecked, some fragments of time-tech turned up scattered around the galaxy. That's why the SSSSSSS are famous. They got hold of some of the

equipment from Vilencia, and even though they didn't have the resources to put together a proper time machine, they still managed to punch a few holes in the fabric of the space-time whatnot. They figured out how to send genetic data through the wormholes. Planting their "seed of Aryan purity" throughout history. There are still whole planets on the fringes of the galaxy that have sprouted blond-haired blue-eyed humanoids because of them.'

'The fiends,' drawled Mr Misnomer. Bernice could tell he'd used that phrase an awful lot in his life. She could also tell he was getting thoroughly sick of it.

'Thing is, the SSSSSSS has this theory that only "the white man" comes from the gene pool of the giants. They believe every other Tribe of Man is descended from a different inferior ape species. So, black men come from gorillas, orientals come from orang-utans... You get the idea. Trouble is, the genes of these ape species don't confirm the theory. Actually, they disprove it. So the SSSSSSS... Can we call them something else? My tongue's getting sore.'

'Sods,' suggested Mr Misnomer.

She nodded. 'All right. So, the Sods genetically engineered their own ape species, ones that had exaggerated racial characteristics. Or do I mean racist characteristics? Either way. They sent the genetic data for these things back and forwards through time, as a kind of living propaganda for their theories. A lot of those anomalous apeman sightings you used to get on Earth were down to the Sods. In the end, most of the apes got shot by hunters in their respective time zones. There's a famous photo of one that got killed in Venezuela in 1920. The old Nazi trick, but on a larger scale. If you want to prove a point, the best way to do it is by rewriting history. Ha-hah!'

The PLEASE WAIT message on the screen on the palmtop had faded away, to be replaced by a series of analytic diagrams in various shades of grey. Bernice scanned the data.

'Well?' asked Mr Misnomer.

Bernice looked up at him. 'Everything is made of atoms,' she said, hurriedly reciting what little she could remember of elementary physics. 'Atoms are made up of electrons orbiting around, er, around some other gubbins. Protons or neutrons or something. *Ergo*, electrons are the most basic things there are, unless you start messing around with quantum physics. The basis of all matter.'

Mr Misnomer was looking at her strangely. Which was reasonable, seeing as she was acting strangely. 'And?'

Bernice grimaced. 'I don't know what this rock is,' she said. 'But there's no electrons in it. Yowzah.'

Ash was being sick. Finally, she was letting go of her stomach muscles and allowing herself to throw up in the cycads.

The so-called 'golden age' of the autolit pulps came to an end in the early 2540s. The conclusion of the 'cold war' between Earth and its neighbours heralded the end of the pent-up sexual tensions that had been brewing in the mass psyche of the human race; suddenly, the thinly veiled fetishism of the Mr Misnomer/Rex Havoc/Captain Carnivore chronicles no longer seemed particularly relevant, or particularly exciting.

!X was somewhere behind her. She no longer cared about turning her back on him. If he wanted to kill her, the way he'd killed the cavemen, then how the hell was she supposed to stop him? Killing was easy. People were fragile. All that kept the human race from drowning in its own internal fluids was a thin membrane of manners. There was no real defence, not from one of the Truly Crazy. God, where was all this shit coming from?

As the era of the pulps drew to a close, an alarming swing towards realism - or what writers such as Oobert Valderburg have called 'cynico-realism' - became evident in the few surviving autolit chronicles. Previously, the companions of Mr Misnomer would react to the horrors they encountered with nothing more than a gasp of awe, or possibly a brief faulting fit, if they were female. But by the 2540s, these characters

were more than likely to spontaneously vomit, their bodily reactions described in graphic detail by the autolit engines.

Ash remembered the homeless sick-faced stragglers who used to hang around the street corners on Magellani Minimata, and the way the children from the academia would cross the skidways to avoid them. The children would pretend to be dead hard, but even the ones with the junior vibroknives would steer clear of the headcases. Not because the headcases had better weapons, or were better fighters. But because they were without ethics. They'd broken through that membrane, and there was nothing holding them back, no pretend decency, no need to think about the consequences of their actions.

!X. The Last of the Truly Crazyed, Fos!ca had called him. Bastard offspring of a planet that was nothing but politeness.

Valdeburg's reasons for calling this trend 'cynico-realism' are obvious. If these pulpzines were truly realistic, characters would not merely be sick. Real people, in situations of stress, are not prone to simply vomit. Their reactions are far more subtle. Cynico-realist characters are no more realistic than the cardboard figures of the early Mr Misnomer chronicles. They are only more visceral.

Ash raised her head. She saw Fos!ca standing beside her, keeping a discreet distance from the patch of ground where Ash had thrown up. The alien woman was staring at the regurgitated material with some alarm.

'I'm sorry,' Fos!ca said. 'Is this a private moment? I didn't know humans regularly lost their stomach lining. I thought that was unique to bovine sentients.'

'It's not stomach lining,' said Ash, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. 'This is a mammal thing. It's a reaction to shock. Why, what do you do?'

'What do we do when what?'

Ash had no idea how to answer that question. She remembered what Fos!ca had said about her own world, and Wondered if the People even understood what 'sick' was. And if they didn't, how was Fos!ca feeling now, having seen what !X had done to the bodies of the dead cavemen?

Oh, God. That was it. Fos!ca's questions, those polite little queries about the state of Ash's health, were practically automatic. Fos!ca was suffering shock. There was nothing inside her head right now but mechanical reactions.

Ash looked back over her shoulder. !X was standing a little way up the jungle trail, looking back in the direction from which they'd come, as if watching to make sure no more of the natives were on their heels. Not much chance of that, though. Not now.

She saw !X, as he had been ten minutes and three hundred metres ago. Standing over the corpses. Sticking one end of the branch, the murder weapon, into the ground. Bending over one of the bodies, the one he'd impaled, and putting a hand on each side of the head. That wrenching motion -

More sick. More sick. It hadn't all come.

- ripping it off -

'It acts as a warning,' !X had said. He'd sounded quite matter-of-fact about the whole thing. 'Primitive minds attach a special importance to the head. A detached skull is an automatic danger sign. They won't follow.'

- the neck on the sharp end of the stick -

!X was staring at her. Not ten minutes ago, but now. More dead eyes. Round black circles in a slippery-smooth face.

'The primitives were deformed,' he said. 'Possibly outcasts from the rest of their race. A breakaway tribe of physical exiles. We need to know what caused the deformities.'

'You bastard,' Ash told him.

A moment's silence.

'You feel guilty?' !X asked.

Ash felt her legs wobble beneath her. 'Why the hell should I feel guilty? I wasn't the one who killed them.'

'No. But I killed them on your behalf. They died, allowing you to survive. Part of you feels responsible for my actions.'

'Misplaced guilt,' added Fos!ca, trying to be helpful.

Ash clenched her fists. What part of me wants to do, she thought, is go over there and punch your face in. But I can't, can I? Because I've still got enough principles to stop me carrying out the killing blow, and you wouldn't think twice.

!X nodded, making Ash wonder if she'd said any of it out loud by mistake. 'You don't understand. Without me, the events taking place in this environment would lose all their significance. If I were put back into confinement, with no possibility of release, the Do[EO]C would lose its meaning. Fos!ca's life would lose its meaning. The culture of the People would lose its meaning.'

Ash shot a glance at Fos!ca, but the woman looked blank. 'What's he talking about?' Ash gurgled.

'You really don't know?' enquired !X. 'I'm surprised. Your culture is different. I expected you to appreciate the necessity. Perhaps a further demonstration would be useful.' He turned towards the jungle trail ahead, and began walking again. Without a pause, Fos!ca followed him.

Another notable characteristic of these chronicles is the passive role of the supporting cast. Though female characters are always portrayed as submissive - a constant prejudice, even though the President of Earth was female between 2536 and 2541 - even male supporting characters like the dauntless Binky Sharperton follow the whims of whatever villain may have the upper hand. Even if a villain is unarmed, these characters will always follow his instructions, treating him as an authoritarian figure almost by default.

Ash hurried along the trail behind them. Her stomach gave one final lurch of protest.

Lucretia and Bernice talked as they walked. Lucretia had heard about the professor's interest in twentieth-century history, so she'd asked her a question about the popular culture of the era a question the human race had been asking itself for nearly six hundred years. Bernice had to think for a full minute before answering.

'The one who did the back flips,' she declared, eventually. 'I always go for the underdog.'

The expedition had begun in earnest. Lucretia counted sixteen of them, in total. Most of the SSSSSSS troops marched at the head of the party, their beady little eyes fixed on the mountain path ahead, rifles drawn, proud Aryan

bodies weighed down by enormous backpacks. Whenever they passed one of the tunnel entrances set into the rock face, they'd get all excited and sweep the caverns within with their weapons, shouting 'cover me' and making primal noises even the Gugs would have appreciated. Behind them hobbled Kommander Katastrophen, and behind him marched another two men, one of them dragging Gug (the name they'd given to their captive Gug) on a leather leash someone had found in the submarine. Why a bunch of fascist soldiers would have brought a leash with them on a submarine Lucretia didn't like to speculate.

Lucretia turned the topic of conversation back to something more relevant. 'So, what's MEPHISTO? I mean, apart from being Satan himself.'

Bernice shrugged. As she was also carrying an SSSSSSS-issue backpack, this wasn't easy. 'The leader of the Tribe of Lilith, maybe? The fact that the name was written in English tells us something. I'm not sure what it tells us, but I'm sure it's something. Beware MEPH, that's what it said in the journal.'

'This place strikes a chord, you know?' Lucretia mumbled. 'I don't know how to put it, but it's like I recognize it. Even if I hadn't seen the old Lost World movies, I think I'd recognize it anyway. It's like... it's on the tip of my mind...'

'Tongue,' said Bernice, sternly. 'The expression is, "on the tip of my tongue". It works as an expression because it shifts the process of speech away from the mind and on to an associated corporeal organ. The same way you talk about the heart when you talk about being in love. If you say "on the tip of my mind", it's piffle: you're starting to use a metaphor but giving up halfway through. It's half an expression. It's like saying "too many cooks can lead to problems of overmanning" or "a bird in the hand is worth something the achievement of which is only a possibility". It's awful English, and it sounds like the kind of thing a sixth-form poet might write because he thinks using the word "mind" makes him look philosophical. If you wrote it in an essay I'd have it shredded.'

‘Urn... is this important, or are you just being pedantic?’

‘I’m not being pedantic, I’m being pernickety. *Now* I’m being pedantic.’

Lucretia was starting to understand how Bernice had got her slightly odd reputation. ‘Well, anyway. All I’m saying is I think this place is doing funny things to my head.’

“We’ll be back after this short break,” said Bernice.

‘I’m sorry?’

Bernice glanced up at Katastrophen, limping ahead of them. ‘Later,’ she murmured.

Lucretia was alarmed to see Katastrophen peer over his shoulder at them! ‘Something you’re not telling us, Professor Summerfield?’ he asked, in a voice that suggested he knew full well there was an awful lot she wasn’t telling them.

‘Who, me?’ said Bernice.

Lucretia decided to try to change the subject. She focused on Gug, being tugged up the pathway by the two SSSSSSS guards, and thought she’d make an issue out of it. ‘Look, do they have to do that? They’re hurting him.’

This was true. The leash had been strapped around Gug’s neck, and his hands had been tied together behind his back. The soldier holding the end of the leash kept tugging it sharply, as if to remind the Neanderthal who was in charge. Katastrophen shot the cave dweller a look of contempt. ‘Your concern is unnecessary, Miss Scannon. He is not human. His feelings are not important.’

‘But you don’t even need him,’ Lucretia said, knowing she was coming perilously close to whingeing. ‘We know where we’re going. Bernice has already told you. It’s not like Gug’s going to be any more help, is it?’

‘No?’ Katastrophen nodded towards another of the tunnel openings, about ten metres up the mountain path. ‘Then perhaps you hadn’t noticed the activity.’

‘Activity?’

‘Each time we pass a tunnel. There are more of the primitives. They are waiting, in the darkness. These are savage creatures, but like all beasts, they value members of their own family or tribe. While we have this... specimen in

our possession, they will not risk an attack.’ He indicated Gug with his caneless hand. ‘Gug,’ agreed Gug, reluctantly.

‘You mean, he’s a hostage?’ asked Lucretia.

‘Quite,’ said Katastrophen.

Bernice sighed. ‘Don’t bother arguing with him,’ she told Lucretia. ‘He’s a big Sod.’

There was a circle of light, a disc of lurid orange. Shadows moved across the circle, things walking upright, stiff-limbed and cautious.

‘The perspective is difficult to cope with,’ one of the Eldest complained. ‘Are we looking at -’

‘At the entrance to one of the cavern tunnels, seen from within,’ the Eldest of the Eldest explained.

There was a growl from elsewhere in the Chamber of Meeting. ‘I detest this. Seeing the world through the eyes of the Gugs... Their synapses are full of detritus. It’s like wading through dung. Neural dung.’

‘This is getting us nowhere,’ snarled the Angriest of the Eldest, with all the fury the others had come to expect from him. ‘I say we kill them. And quickly.’

The Chamber fell silent, except for the heavy breathing of the Angriest, and the steady drip-drip-dripping as he slobbered on to the floor. One by one, the thirteen opened their eyes.

‘They should reach the edge of our territory by nightfall,’ the Eldest of them announced. ‘We wait until the sun extinguishes itself, then we make our move. Agreed?’

'DOOMED!'

It was going dark, at last. The sun at the heart of the world was dimming, quickly enough to make a difference but too slowly for the mind to consciously notice. Everything in the jungle turned the colour of firelight.

A normal sunset, Fos!ca realized. However alien this place might have been, some things were just as they were back home.

!X continued to clear a path through the jungle, leading them along invisible trails he claimed had been left by the primitives. At the start of the trek, he'd left behind mutilated corpses (or parts thereof) as warning signs to any savages that might follow them, but Fos!ca had understood this to be a primitive territorial ceremony indicating a symbolic link er er er between !X and the local life forms that probably suggested er quickly more words the words will cover up the images oh please God er where was I oh yes which probably suggested that !X fitted the psychomorphic template of this environment better than the Do[EO]C had expected.

Good.

Like Fos!ca, Ash followed !X without question, her face turned down to the ground. Fos!ca had tried talking to her, but the woman hadn't seemed interested. Strange, really. The two of them had so much in common. They were both educated in matters psychological, though Ash's talk of 'neuroseismology' had seemed like the kind of meaningless psychobabble one a had to expect front pre-scarcity hierarchical fight-flee-contrast anxiety-based cultures.

'Stop,' said !X.

They all stopped. Fos!ca looked around. This part of the jungle was the same as any other, though the changing light

made their surroundings look jagged and angular, like one of the glass-and-polychrome expressionist cities on the iAnemb An!xs mesa. The perspective looked wrong, in places. The shadows fell in unexpected directions below the branches.

'The light's changing,' Fos!ca suggested.

'Not the light. The gravity.' !X looked back at her. Fos!ca could look right into his face now, without squirming or wanting to hide under a bush. 'Something is causing disruptions in the local gravitational field. The jungle is feeling the effects. So are our nervous systems. This is why you're perceiving the light differently. Up ahead. Look.'

Fos!ca concentrated. In response to this, her left pupil slid out of position, to be replaced by the secondary lens she'd sewn into her eye as a dare during the early years of her adolescence. The new pupil was capable of seeing infrared and ultraviolet light sources, and its filtering software could split a rainbow into three hundred distinct perceived colours, but the thing made her eyes itch when it was in place, and besides, her friends always said it made her look ugly. She closed her other eye and squinted through the new lens.

Suddenly the sky above the far-off treetops looked blurred, as if something invisible, or not quite invisible, had been stretched between the ground and the sky. A column of air slightly out of phase with the rest of reality, twinkling with displaced light, doing its best to wriggle away from Fos!ca's senses. She realized it was a cone, not a column, with its base at ground level, and its tip... where? Kilometres overhead? In the sun, even?

'The gravitational disturbance,' !X mused. 'The primitives were disfigured. This is the probable cause.'

That was when Fos!ca made her worst mistake so far. She tore her eyes away from the sky, and looked at !X.

Instantly, her left eye was filled with a blaze of light, and she blinked wildly, her filters not adjusting in time. Through the secondary lens, she could see a halo around !X's shoulders, cycling through every visible part of the spectrum as her retina tried to get a grip on it. And his face. His face. His face was -

Different. It was different. There was er there was something er er black eyes in the centre of er God there were two er black eyes at the centre of the halo but the way he looked through her left eye was different from the way he looked through the right eye like she was looking through the skin of the world through the membrane and seeing and seeing and seeing what was underneath what his face what his face really was and

Ba-doom ba-doom ba-doom.

The secondary lens shut itself off, its subtle biological engines understanding that part of Fos!ca's brain was about to haemorrhage. Fos!ca went blind in her left eye. The lens disconnected from the retina, and retracted into its storage space behind the eyelid. Fos!ca staggered backward. She could still see out of her right eye, but her balance was gone, and in a moment of panic she threw up her hands to stop any more of the light touching her face. Vision returned in the left eye, but all she could see was red

Ba-doom ba-doom, she thought. *Ba-doom ba-doom ba-doom.*

'That's where we're going?' Ash asked. It was the first time the human woman had spoken since she'd emptied her stomach, but Fos!ca could hardly hear the words, not with all the other noise. Red. Why was everything to her left red?

'Yes,' said !X.

Ba-doom ba-doom. Couldn't they see what was happening? Didn't they feel it, too? The sick yellow of the jungle appeared through the haze of red, and Fos!ca saw the fingers of her hand, covered in speckles of blood. Her eye was bleeding. Something had broken inside her eye.

Ba-doom ba-doom.

'Can you hear something?' said Ash.

A slight pause. !X would be nodding, on the other side of the big red wall. 'Yes. More of the natives.'

'It sounds like drums,' said Ash. 'Up ahead.'

Ba-doom.

'Yes.' Another pause. 'Wait.'

There were footsteps, vanishing into the jungle. !X slipping away from them. Fos!ca told her cardiovascular system to

slow down. She should have been able to alter her heart rate with a thought, as she'd been taught when she'd been a prepubescent entity, but she couldn't remember what shape the thought was supposed to be. She tried to shake the blood out of her face. There was no sign of !X by the time she looked up, but Fos!ca could almost see a man-shaped hole in the world where he'd been standing. Ash wasn't far away. There was a faint vibration beneath their feet.

Ash seemed to notice her, at last. 'Kryste, is that blood on your hands? Are you OK?'

'It's not me,' Fos!ca whimpered. 'I thought it was me, but it wasn't.'

Ash looked blank. 'What?'

'The sound. The drumming. It's the jungle.' *Ba-doom. Ba-doom.* 'But we *are* the jungle now, aren't we? We're part of it. We'll never get away from it. Oh. My eye hurts.'

She sat down, her suit tightening around her legs as she lowered herself on to the ground. One last drop of blood trickled from her cheek before her body spotted the damage and started to patch it up. Ash looked vaguely embarrassed.

'Look,' she said, then stopped. 'Look,' she tried again. 'I don't... I don't trust !X. No, obviously, I don't trust him, I mean... I think we should keep an eye on him. Erm. Sorry. What I'm saying is, I don't think we should let him get out of sight. You're sure you're going to be OK?'

Fos!ca nodded.

'Good. Right.' Ash moved away from her, along the jungle trail. 'You stay there, get your breath back. I'll go and see what he's up to. All right?'

Fos!ca nodded again, but Ash wasn't looking. She'd already vanished into the trees, following !X again, but this time pretending he didn't want her to. In the ground beneath her, Fos!ca could feel the vibration of the drumbeat, pounding in time with her blood.

Ba-doom ba-doom ba-doom.

It was getting dark. Six-o'clock-in-winter dark. The kind of dark that needs a cup of tea and the early-evening news to be

complete. The party had stopped on a plateau, which had been carved into the rock on the side of the mountain. No, not carved, thought Mr Misnomer. Although the plateau - indeed, the entire pathway - appeared artificial, the whole thing looked too regular for a primitive construction. Mr Misnomer got the impression that the peak had been designed and created as a single unit, with a convenient spiral road and regularly spaced tunnel complexes. The second mountain in the range, their supposed destination, seemed identical to the first, as if whatever gods created the underworld had only the one mould.

The party had stopped on Kommander Katastrophen's orders. It was unwise, the old fascist had insisted, to continue in the dark. At his word, the rest of the SSSSSSS goons had started setting up camp, extracting handipac tents and canned campfires from their backpacks. Now the dozen or so Nazi troopers were gathered in small groups around the fires, breaking out plastiflagons of Saknusseinm Pils and singing obscene songs about Austrian milkmaids. They weren't drunk, of course. They'd never dare get drunk in the presence of their commanding officer. They were just acting in the rowdy, masculine fashion expected of heterosexual Aryans when they got together in large numbers.

Bernice and Lucretia had been granted their own campfire, some distance from those of the men, and they sat on opposite sides of it. looking suitably glum. In her boots and breeches, Professor Summerfield looked a lot like one of the adventurers of Misnomer's own era, albeit with XX chromosomes and bigger eyelashes. Lucretia, meanwhile, looked nervous and more than a little lost. The girl had no place on this journey, Mr Misnomer decided. She might have made an OK sidekick, possibly standing in die background acting cute, but she seemed unwilling even to do that. Besides, her tits weren't big enough.

The final member of the expedition, though an unwilling one, was Gug the Gug, who'd been tied to a tentpeg by overenthusiastic stormtroopers. Poor bastard, thought Mr

Misnomer. Probably thinks we're going to sacrifice him to Morgo the Slime-God or something.

Misnomer himself stood by the entrance to one of the tunnels. The caves within had already been scouted out by the troops, who'd found them to be inhabited by a large bat species, but there'd been no signs of Gug life for some time now, Gug the Gug expected. Mr Misnomer finished peeling off his gauntlet, slid the lighter out of its concealed pouch, then reached a little further into the glove and pulled out a cigarette. He lit it with the famous Mr M flourish.

'Are you supposed to do that?' said an irritatingly girly voice by his ear.

Mr Misnomer coughed in surprise, and dropped the cigarette. Lucretia had materialized next to him. Did the girl really have that many freckles, he wondered, or was she just so wet she gave the impression of having that many freckles?

'God almighty. Where'd you come from?'

'Sorry.' She watched him bend down to retrieve the cigarette. 'I thought it looked kind of odd, that's all.'

'What is this, the Spanish Inquisition? I can smoke if I damn well want. I always used to.'

'Only in the mid-2530s,' Lucretia corrected him. 'That was during the period when Melbourne Autolit Services was sponsored by KroyChem AgroMedical, though. They used to produce cancer combat drugs. Sort of like a vested interest.'

Mr Misnomer relit the cigarette. 'Pardon me for breathing. Forgot there were experts on my lifestyle around.'

'Oh, I helped Ash with her thesis. I remember most of the details. I'm like that. Ash says I'm anally retentive. Thing is, I thought you only ever smoked synonicotine. That's what surprised me, really. Isn't that a Happy Methuselah cigarette? You can tell by the funny shape of the filter.'

'Hah.' Mr Misnomer took a loooooooooooooong drag on the cigarette, and felt the spectrocarcinogens digging their little pickaxes into his throat lining. God, that was better.

'What's the matter? Scared I'll be a bad influence on the children?' He nodded towards the SSSSSSS men, who were

now singing hymn number eighteen, the one about the woman who had three children of different species and uncertain parentages. 'In case you hadn't noticed, I'm supposed to be ninety-six years old. And in case you hadn't noticed, I've still got chest muscles that can stop bullets and legs that can kick dents in solid steel. Allegedly.'

'But I thought that was your special techniques,' Lucretia protested. 'You know. The things you learnt on New Tibet...'

'Secret teachings, my arse. Age-reduction drugs.' No, not age-reduction drugs, you old liar. You could never afford that kind of stuff. Just cell-patchers and funny cigarettes. Young on the outside, old on the inside. Your biosystem might as well be stuck together with chewing gum. You never found that fountain of youth, not even that time Dr Harbinger claimed to have discovered it in Lost Atlantis. 'You ever used any drugs?'

Lucretia shook her head. 'Not really. I mean. I took heroin at school, but everybody does that.'

'Then I'll tell you something. When you've taken one substance for a long time - any substance, doesn't have to be a narcotic - you start to think of your body in a different kind of way. Like it's not really yours any more. Like your real self, all those chemicals you had in you when you were born, or tube-spawned, whatever, have got themselves replaced by die stuff you've been patching into your biosystem. When you get to that point, you don't worry about the ethics of what you're doing. Why not introduce a few chemicals more? Hell, it's not your body now, what's to lose?'

He took another drag. Oh God, here it comes, the spectric rush, churning up the old neuroptides and turning the lungs into so much guacamole. Yesssssssss. 'I told your friends this job is the only thing that gives me any identity. Not exactly true. Sec this, here in my hand? This is my secret identity. Every adventurer needs a secret identity.'

One black one, one green one, and one with a cybergraft machine on, sang the Nazis. Mr Misnomer realized he wasn't looking at Lucretia any more, hadn't been all through that little soliloquy of his. He was staring into space.

Yeah. Staring into space. Good place to stare. Why not?
'What's your name?' Lucretia asked, quietly.
'Mr Misnomer.'
'No, your real name. Your first name.'
'Don't have one,' he told her. 'Never needed one.'

Bernice crept along the mountain trail, keeping her body close to the rock face. The sound of the Young Nazi Male Voice Choir of the Year 2594 drifted through the air behind her, but faded into a mere annoying murmur as she ascended.

Eventually, she passed far enough around the mountain to be out of sight of the others. She crouched down, and planted the SSSSSSS-issue torch in the ground. It was a solid piece of hardware, designed for hitting people with as well as lighting things up, so it stayed upright as she screwed it into the dirt. She flicked the switch, then reached into her satchel.

Something small and yellow slipped out of her diary as Bernice opened it. Her diary was full of the sticky notes, and this one must have been shaken loose at some point. She picked the note up and inspected it.

26th December [it read]. No hangover, remarkably. Went to the annual University Boxing Day slug-racing championships. Put fifteen shillings on Fat Lightning at 8-1. Came in first. Celebrated by not getting absolutely bladdered.

Bernice frowned. Odd. Usually, she stuck notes over her diary entries when she wanted a chance to rewrite her past, but as far as she could remember this was an honest and true account of what had happened on Boxing Day. Which meant she was now so good at rewriting her past that either her memories were being similarly affected, or the entire fabric of space and time was being rewritten to accommodate her.

Either way, the note had lost its value as a historical document. She screwed it into a little ball and threw it off the mountain. Let future historians passing this way be fooled by

it, she thought. Then she took a university-made disposable infostylus out of her coat pocket and started to write.

Scribble scribble. Work, you stupid pen, work. A-ha.

January 14th. Well, isn't this jolly? Up on a mountaintop with a bunch of dashing young men in uniform. Such a pity they're all ugly as puck. Funny, isn't it, how people who go on about genetic purity always look like extras out of Deliverance? Still, I'm not exactly well disposed towards them, seeing as one of their short-range surveillance devices is currently monitoring every word I write. Hi up there.

Bernice stopped scribbling, but didn't look up. There was a moment's silence, then a tiny zipping noise, which she wouldn't have noticed if she hadn't been listening for it. The surveillance device was the size of an eyeball, appropriately, and equipped with a tiny low-level antigrav engine; the zipping sound was its hurried retreat. Back to Katastrophen's pocket, no doubt. Such devices were of limited intelligence, Bernice knew, programmed to return to their masters if detected.

She kept writing.

That's better. Now. To business. There's something bothering me about this underworld, dear diary, even apart from the fact that it's in blatant contempt of the laws of physics, and the fact that it seems to be made out of something other than matter, and the fact that its inhabitants keep dropping snatches of English into their conversation. It's not a scientific problem I have, you see. It's an instinctual one.

Bernice stopped to stare at the word 'instinctual', eventually crossing it out and replacing it with 'instinctive'. That looked even worse, so she crossed out the whole sentence and decided to change tack.

Thing is, this 'Hollow Earth' should seem unreal, like a theme park on Disneyplanet or Mimsey's Rock or somewhere. But it doesn't. It feels more than real. Superreal. I mean, the idea of a planet being hollow and full of monsters is pretty archetypal anyway, which is probably why the SSSSSSS has been

*attracted here. Perhaps that's it. The place strikes a chord, like Lucretia said.
It's not exactly familiar, it's*

She stopped for a third time, trying to think of a suitable adjective. She couldn't. Once again, she gave up and crossed out the sentence. Underneath, in extra-large letters - so she'd read it back later and realize this was a moment of profundity - she scrawled:

Archetypal. Not just the idea of the Hollow Earth. This place is full of archetypal encounters. Absolute values. Predator/prey conflicts. Kill-or-be-killed struggles. Good guys and bad guys.

And in even larger letters:

Mr Misnomer fits in here perfectly.

Finally, taking up the whole of the opposing page:

This place has no subtlety.

Bernice finished the sentence with a flourish, and added the full stop with aplomb. She stared at the page for a whole minute. She wasn't sure why. There was something there, something in what she'd written...

Thoughtfully, she threw the infostylus off the mountain. There was, she decided, something very satisfying about throwing things off mountains.

'DOWN, DOWN, DEEPER, AND DOWN!'

Where were we?

Oh yes.

Ba-doom. Ba-doom. Ba-doom ba-doom ba-doom.

The rhythm of the jungle, or the sound of the bloodstream? Possibly both. Magical thinking. Belief in some unspoken link between environment and personal 'inner space', a hallmark of pre-industrial non-scientific cultures. Is that what I am? Have I become pre-industrial? Interesting scientific query. I shall have to ask the Do[EO]C. There should be papers written. Perhaps they'll decide that I, too, am mad, and should thus be sent to Paradise.

Ba-doom ba-doom. Mad or not, I know the truth. I am part of this place. Or, possibly, part of this place is me. Disorganizational semantic juggling. Symptom of shock and lack of focus.

Look. Look. I'm not alone. !X has left me, and Ash has followed him, but there are others. They're called primitives. On the worldsphere they'd be 'barbarians', which is the name we give to the ones who remember what only !X really understands. Is that what I meant to think? I think so. The barbarians are here, and they're coming for me. This is only paranoia, I know, but paranoia is the substance of being here. Oh. I wish I were writing this down.

Ba-doom. Hands brushing against me, hairy and damp in the darkness. I can hear the voices, pick up the scent of rotting organic material and dried blood. Dragging me to my feet. I can feel my knees scraping against the ground, and I can feel the suit folding itself in tight little clusters there, trying to protect my skin. The only protection I have left.

Am I imagining this, or is it real, or does the paranoia feed the reality? There's something important here, I'm sure, but all I can focus on is my own chemistry. They're wearing masks. They're beating drums. Signs of ceremonial activity. Adrenaline's in my blood, though I no longer know how to interpret the signals. I can't help feeling that fear and panic are expected of me.

I'll oblige them, then. I'll do what this world wants me to do. I'll begin to scream.

One year ago:

'You mean, you're scared of the dark?' asked Ash, trying not to laugh.

'I'm not scared of the dark,' snuffled Lucretia. 'I'm scared of the things that live in the dark.'

'Yeah? Like what?'

'Um. Things, that's all. Can you turn that light back on, please?'

Eight months ago:

'I have, in case you were wondering, not simply turned off the lights,' explained the lecturer. 'I've shut down the lighting system for this entire faculty. So, we should be receiving an unhappy visit from the Head of Department any minute now.'

A nervous laugh from around the lecture theatre. Instinctively, Ash put her hand on the pouch of her combat jacket, where she kept her moneyslot. Things that live in the dark, Lucretia had said. Yeah. Like pickpockets, for example.

'And why have I done this?' enquired the lecturer, rhetorically. 'I'll tell you why. We're going to perform an experiment. We're going to put to the test Vendergriffs Law of Neuroseismological Reasoning. To wit: 'the whole of human existence is an unending search for warmth in a dark place'.'

There were muted squawks and assorted cries of alarm from around the hall. The lecturer sighed, deeply. 'I didn't mean that literally,' he intoned, and Ash got the impression he went through this same routine every year. 'Settle down, children, please.'

Several hours ago:

‘I know what you mean,’ said Bernice, as they descended into the depths of the atoll. ‘I’ve had to go through this kind of thing before. It’s the responsibility. Knowing that if you don’t do the right thing, then... Goodness, it’s dark. Have you got those torches?’

Ash started rooting around in one of her pockets. ‘So, how long have you known Lucretia?’ Bernice asked while she rummaged.

‘Since the start of last year,’ Ash told her. ‘We arrived on Dellah the same day. Got to know each other pretty quickly.’

‘Really? You were like a double act, the day I met you. I got the impression you’d grown up together.’

‘Uh-huh. She’s from Sarah-361, did you know that?’

‘Mmm. Not a great name for a planet, I’d have thought.’

‘Yeah, that’s what everyone says. Back before the breakout, five or six hundred years ago, you could pay the Star Registry to name a star after you, right? So when they started colonizing... well. I suppose you know about that more than I do. Anyway, you get really messed up by the way they raise you on 361. Lucretia attaches herself to people really quickly. I’m probably the best friend she’s got.’

‘Yes. You did seem very close.’

Ash finally located the torches. They were the size of birthday-cake candles, exactly the right shape to get lost in the lining of her jacket. Transferring them to Bernice’s satchel might be a good idea, she decided. ‘Well, y’know. We had sex, once. But that’s about it.’

‘Nothing unusual about that. Any non-repressed adolescent, taken out of his or her natural environment, will ultimately cop off with his or her best friend, regardless of gender. First thing they teach you when you become a university tutor.’

Ash flicked the tiny plastic switch on the side of the first torch. ‘Yeah. Like Vendergriffs Law says. “The whole of human existence...”’

Now:

Ash wasn't sure exactly when it had gone dark. It had been like dusk, yeah, but all of a sudden there wasn't even enough light to see the trees in front of her face.

She stopped running. She wasn't sure how long she'd been running, either.

You mean, you 're still afraid of the dark?

An unending search...

Goodness, it's dark.

She was lost. Maybe that was why it had seemed lighter, before. Because she'd known where she was going.

Because she'd been following !X.

Oh, Christ. How had she got into this mess? She wanted, more than anything else, to find !X again, because he was the only kind of safety she had. A psycho alien who'd probably kill her as soon as he got the chance. Her own private warmth in a dark place.

No. She wasn't going to give him the satisfaction. Think what you wrote in your thesis, she told herself. All pulpzine fiction is based on the supposition that the male-aggressive participant will lead the way, regardless of qualification. Break that conditioning. Just like you broke your conditioning on the colony, when you had hormonal treatment to stop you thinking like a pack animal. Just like you broke it when you cut your hair and started buying clothes out of Space Fleet Surplus. Your friends said you were doing it to make an ironic statement about the nature of imperialism. You knew it went deeper than that.

Ash started moving again. The drumming was still going on, a sticky vibration under her feet, and the further she walked, the stronger it got. She was heading towards the source. She'd Find it herself, scout out the terrain, then get back to Fos!ca, and -

She walked into something solid.

There was a scraping sound ahead of her. A spark.

The spark became a flame. Torchlight. A burning brand.

'Ash,' said !X.

Ash started hyperventilating. A sensation welled up in her stomach, but she didn't identify it until a sentence came together in her mouth and fell out between her lips.

'Oh, thank God,' she said. And she knew the sensation was relief, and knew she hadn't broken the conditioning at all. The drumming stopped, so Ash could hear the sounds it had been masking, the shuffling of deformed feet, the guttural mutterings of a race that hadn't quite invented language yet.

'My people,' said !X.

The cavemen moved in. Instinctively, Ash put her hand on the pouch of her combat jacket, where she kept her moneyslot.

Vier und zwanzig virgins came down to Inverness, chorused the men. Und when the ball was over there were vier und zwanzig less.

A tiny eye-shaped icon lit up on the inside of Ernst Katastrophen's spectacles, a yellow neon pictogram hovering above his left nostril. Katastrophen very nearly lifted a hand to swat it away before realizing what it meant. He glanced around. Nobody was watching him.

He opened a black-gloved hand. The eyeball drone dropped out of the air, antigrav engine off-line, into his palm. He closed his fist around it before anyone noticed, and gave the little sphere a squeeze, pressing down its datanodes.

Instantly, the surveillance unit beamed the vid-footage it had taken of Professor Summerfield on to the pixscreens on the inside of Katastrophen's spectacles. Hopefully, from the outside, the lights flickering across the lenses would be mistaken for firelight reflections. If any of his men knew he had a complete visual computer system built into his glasses, he'd lose that aloof, godlike air that all good leaders of men were supposed to possess. He watched the pictures for a while, watching Summerfield on the darkened mountain slope. He found himself squinting to read her diary entry.

So. The professor knew.

'Mein Kommander?'

Beside him, Doktor Fetisch was leaning over to speak to him. The two of them stood on the edge of the camp, not far from the brink of the mountain trail. 'Ich shall survey der area now, ja?' said Fetisch, in that terrible affected accent of his. You can take cultural pride a little too far, Katastrophen reflected. 'We should take readings with der very good SSSSSSS-issue handscan.'

'As you wish,' the *kommander* told him. Nodding to himself, Fetisch turned, and shambled away down the path.

Yes, thought Katastrophen. Head downward. The professor is up the trail, and I don't want to be interrupted when I speak to her. It's going to be hard enough as it is.

He began limping away from the campsite, up the trail. He didn't risk looking around, but he was fairly sure no one saw him go. The troops were all too busy being pretend-drunk to take note. He hobbled onward, until the songs of the men faded into the background. The lights of the campsite vanished behind him, the path twisting sharply around the mountainside.

Then he saw the torch, embedded in the ground. Professor Summerfield was still hunched over it, her face transformed into a brilliant yellow kabuki mask by the electric light. Her diary was open in her hands, though she'd stopped writing now. She was flicking through the old entries, occasionally frowning dubiously, as if not quite believing what she was reading.

Katastrophen cleared his throat, politely. The professor snapped the book shut.

'Professor Summerfield,' he began, with a little nod. 'I wish to speak to you. Alone.'

The woman raised an eyebrow. 'Really? I wouldn't have thought I was your type.'

Katastrophen sighed. 'Please. Professor.'

She slipped her diary into her satchel, then zipped it up in a fashion that could only be called disgruntled. 'All right. Say what you feel you've got to say.'

'Professor, in case you hadn't noticed, you and I have much in common. We are both students of antique arts and

sciences. I admit, I am not an academic, yet I am educated in the histories and cultures of as many worlds as you are, I'm certain. We have such similar interests '

'No.' Summerfield shook her head, a little sadly. 'I study alien cultures because they're interesting, because I like the adventure, and because I enjoy getting drunk and talking about them loudly to undergraduates in student bars. You study alien cultures because you want to know about their weaknesses. Ready for your "Last Glorious Crusade". We're not alike at all.'

Ah. She knew so much, this one. 'But we both seek the truths, the ancient truths, which hold our universe together. Do not pretend, Professor, you want us to fail in our quest to find the Pool of Life. You would be fascinated, just as I am fascinated. Is it so hard for us to have a mutual respect? I distrust you as much as you distrust me. I spy on you. You plot against me. It seems... unnecessary. Even if we cannot be friends, should we at least not speak as allies?'

'You've changed your tune since we were in the cavern.'

'That was a show of force. I meant nothing by it. One must maintain the appearance of control in front of one's men.'

There was a long silence. Or almost a silence. The verses of the SSSSSSS troops began to drift up the mountain trail on a warm breeze, peppering the air with suggestive, half-formed phrases. There was an expression on Earth, Katastrophen remembered: 'turning the air blue'. It seemed appropriate, here. As if the obscenities of his men were becoming part of the atmosphere, frozen into the environment.

'No,' said the professor, ultimately.

'Professor -'

'I said, no.' Bernice made proper eye contact with him for the first time, and Katastrophen was surprised by what was in her expression. 'I was tortured, Kommander. Did you know that? I was tortured, by your ancestors. The ones you like to think of as martyrs and noble supermen. The bastard offspring of Hermann Goering. They put me in a cell, took away everything I had. They let me keep my hair, but only so I could hang on to that one shred of hope, so they could use

it and turn it against me. I killed someone. Maybe more than one person. Not because I wanted to, maybe not even because I had to. Because I wanted to survive. That's what your kind did to me. That's what you tried to turn me into. An animal, running for cover at every opportunity. Do you even understand what that means?'

Tortured? Was the woman telling the truth? Yes, the SSSSSSS handbook, the *Mein Pantz* of Bernard Richtmanning, recommended the use of torture in certain circumstances, but surely she could never have offended the organization so much that...

When was this?' Katastrophen enquired.

'Nineteen forty-one,' replied Summerfield, without a pause.

Katastrophen felt his jaw bob up and down. 'That is impossible,' he stammered.

The professor looked away. 'You're the ones who raided the Jonson's Engine project. You know time travel's feasible, you know the technology's out there. Oh, shit.' She wrapped her arms around herself, as if to keep her body warm, though it wasn't at all cold on the mountainside. 'Look, I keep having these conversations with people where I end up having to explain to them about visiting other time zones. And I never know how much I'm supposed to say. I don't want to talk about it. That's all.'

'But... you met the forefathers? The original Nazi Party?' Katastrophen felt like jumping up and down. 'This is remarkable, Professor. Remarkable. You must tell me. Please. You must tell me what they were like.'

'Sods. Just like you. You rewrite their history and turn them into saints, but they were just Sods. History's full of them. You're no exception. The only difference between them and you is they believed in what they were doing more than you do. Not that this is necessarily a good thing, of course.'

'What?'

'You heard. I've seen the way you look, Kommander. That hollow look. That emptiness. Like you're looking for something, anything, to make it all make sense. That's why

you want to find your Holy Grail, isn't it? Because it would make you feel like you've been driven by some kind of purpose all your life. And you haven't.'

'Lies!' He was shouting at her, he realized. Losing his grip. Did he always do that, when he got nervous?

'It's a lie, Kommander. It's all you've got left that gives you any sense of being. You're running ninety-five per cent on automatic and five per cent on whatever grudge you're still holding against these "subhumans" you're supposed to hate so much. You're as flat as Mr Misnomer. Another storybook character with nothing on the inside. A hollow hero for a hollow planet.'

Katastrophen stiffened. He felt like saluting, like clicking his heels together, anything to take him back to a level he felt comfortable with. He didn't. He knew she'd take that as proof she was right.

'We have nothing to talk about, then,' he said, mechanically.

'That's what I said.'

Katastrophen wanted to say something else, but there was nothing to say. He turned on his heel, and marched away, attempting to keep his limp under control.

Back at the camp, the rest of the SSSSSSS men were launching themselves into the first verse of 'Jerusalem', a traditional macho rugby song from Old Earth. The lyrics about England had been changed to lyrics about Smarley's World, but the fact that the piece was named after the first city of the Jews went unnoticed by everyone except Katastrophen.

...in Smarley's green and pleasant land.

'Is it a battle hymn?' the Youngest of the Eldest asked. 'The melody seems... almost militaristic.'

'Almost, but not quite,' mused another of the thirteen. 'I have heard a similar form of composition before. From the lips of the First Traveller.'

“That settles it,” grumbled the Angriest of the Eldest. “Get them. Get them all. Before they do to us what the First Traveller did to us.”

The Eldest of the Eldest attempted to raise an eyebrow, but her facial muscles were far too weak. Her retainers obligingly looked surprised and contemptuous on her behalf. “Oh? And what, precisely, did the First Traveller do to us?”

“You know very well,” barked the Angriest. “He made us like *this*.”

“I can’t make out all the words,” complained the Youngest. “Could we get the Gug to concentrate?”

“No. We agreed. We would wait until nightfall before acting. The night has now fallen. The sun has reached its darkest point. It’s time.”

Doktor Fetisch kept nodding. Nodding, he reminded himself, was good. All great scientists nodded. Oh, ja. Veritable nodding machines they were, pottering around their laboratories, their heads wobbling up and down as they checked their apparatus. Ach! And to think that he, Doktor Wilhelm Hermann Eisenck Fetisch, was thrown out of the Academy von Stroppenheim for Advanced Neogenetic Research, just because they thought he was mad. Mad! Him! Hahahaaahaaah!

He swept the palmtop across the rock face one more time. It was as the preliminary results had indicated. There was some kind of gravitational anomaly here. As for the genetic potential of this underworld... perhaps he should get Kommander Katastrophen to have his men capture one of the giant bats. It would make an excellent sample for dissection. Technically, it wasn’t strictly necessary to dissect something in order to scan its DNA, but Doktor Wilhelm Hermann Eisenck Fetisch never did things by halves.

He waved the handscan at one of the gigantic mushrooms that sprouted from the cracks in the rock. The plateau where the handipac tents had been set up was devoid of vegetable life, but here on the pathway, out of sight of the encampment, the fungi were in full bloom. The handscan

burbled to itself, before spewing out an analysis of the fungal DNA stream.

The mushroom didn't seem to have one.

No DNA? Ridiculous. Fetisch nodded. Why, a life form with no DNA was like... well, it was like finding an object with no electrons. The machine had to be malfunctioning. Ja. He nodded again, and looked up from the blank readings, searching for some good, solid surface to bash the device against.

Against all expectations, he found himself staring into a pair of eyes. In alarm, Fetisch nodded at them.

The eyes were round and dark, set into a pale, flat face which the *doktor* had to stare at for several seconds before he could get it all into his head. The face had a nose, and a mouth, and ears, and all of them were in roughly the right positions, so he was momentarily fooled into thinking the features were human. But the nose wasn't nearly developed enough. It was a mere hump, with wide, flaring nostrils. The face was surrounded by a wild mane of dark hair, the sideburns as thick and shaggy as the fur on top of the head.

Ja! That was it! An ape. A monkey, of some kind. Fetisch nodded and nodded and nodded and nodded. A monkey, with the same height and build as an average human. A monkey, clutching in its paws - nein, hands - a silver needle-shaped device, forty or fifty centimetres long, maybe a weapon of some kind...

Oh. Oh dear.

The simian creature nodded back at Doktor Wilhelm Hermann Eisenck Fetisch, then pointed its needle thing at him. Everything went blue.

REALITY

Interoffice Memo, dispatch 22:13:13,15/01/94.

From: Dr W. Bicknel, Behavioural Analysis desk, floor 6/1.

To: Chief Officer Q. Pupp, floor 1/2.

Quinton -

God, you really know how to pick 'em. You had us on 'sea monster duty' all last week, and now this. The boys down here are laying 4-1 odds you're trying to wind us up. Only reason I haven't put money on it is that I've already bet 2-1 you don't have a sense of humour any more. Hurry up and have your annual personality check-up, I want to collect.

The serious stuff, though. We've finished going through the first batch of monitor records you sent us. Voice analysis, poise analysis, the works. Yeah, you know the drill, here's the usual disclaimer. The following information is a speculative profile, and has no value as evidence in a criminal prosecution, etc. etc. etc., although there's enough here for an indefinite suspension under the Convention. The usual spiel.

OK. First, the body language. (By the way, can we get a better monitoring system fitted in the cells up there? The V-footage of the prisoner we've got is covered in scratchy bits.) Looks like you were right when you said she isn't your typical Imperial stooge. Most of the body language comes across as Earth Normal, but our interpreter loops can't cope with some of the quirks. My best guess is she's a traveller, and she's been picking up nasty habits all over the place. God knows where she's been, though.

Having established that her body language is way out of whack, and therefore that any conclusions we might draw aren't exactly 100 per cent reliable, here's my guess at her mental state. I don't think she's a nut. She's deluded, sure,

but she's not a nut. If her blood tests hadn't come up neg for narcotics, I'd say she was suffering a drug-induced hallucination. If you take a look at the nervegram readings (enclosed), you can see most of what she's telling us isn't a lie, as such. A lot of the time, the patterns we're getting say she's exaggerating, but not lying. So, for example, if she tells you she was attacked by a three-metre-high sabre-toothed tiger, she probably believes she was attacked by a row-metre-high sabre-toothed tiger. Figure it out.

What convinces me she's not crazy, though, is the way she tells bits of the story from other people's points of view. Yeah, she talks about events she admits she didn't witness (a couple of times, she even says things like "meanwhile, a few kilometres away"), but apart from that, she keeps describing the way people felt when they did things. In all the psycho cases I've seen, the crazies think they're the only ones who matter, and everyone else is a piece of meat with a face. This one makes up private lives for her characters, and a lot of the time their private lives are a damn sight more convincing than *hers* is.

By the way, have you noticed how often people in her story end up getting captured? The bit where she's tied up by Nazis says it all. It's like she's turning her own situation into fiction, maybe so she can cope with it better. In which case, Kommander Katastrophen is probably a caricature of you, Quint. Put it like this: if they ever make a film of this story, they'll get the same actor to play you and him. Ever seen *The Wizard of Oz* on V-cast? I'm guessing this MEPHISTO character might be a kind of overblown paranoia complex about the Empire. A great big megalomaniac force controlling everything from behind the scenes... You get the idea.

If you want to know more about the nervegram readings, take a look at file 43. It's an extract from the autotranscript of the interview, and I've stapled die readings to the side of the sheet so you can see the emotional state she was in while she was talking. I've made a few notes in the text, might make things a bit clearer. Know how much you hate number-crunching.

Soon as you've finished the next interview session, tell us about it. We all want to know how the story ends. I've put money on a 6-1 bet this !X character is going to get snuffed in a one-on-one showdown with Mr Misnomer.

File 43

[Section of interview commencing 14:17:08, conducted by Constable J. Aposta in the absence of Chief Officer Q. Pupp. Hardcopied from Behavioural Analysis desk.]

APOSTA:... so let me try and picture this, OK? Where were you by this time?

SUMMERFIELD *[irritation]*: I told you. I was further up the mountain. I'd been making notes in my diary. Kalastrophon had left and gone back to the camp.

APOSTA: And you got attacked?

SUMMERFIELD: Yes. No. Not me personally. Look, I can't talk properly. I need another drink.

[Note nervegram readings here. Nervousness, sudden surge of anxiety. The request for water is a distraction. Summerfield doesn't want to go on with the story any longer. Not without prompting, anyway.]

APOSTA: Water later. Tell me the story. Who attacked you?

SUMMERFIELD *[exaggerated sigh]*: The ape people. We didn't know what they were, then. The first I knew was when I started walking back down to the camp. The Nazis had stopped singing. There was shouting. I remember the shouting. I thought the men were fighting amongst themselves. It's the usual thing, you take a bunch of young men and let them get drunk - or pretend-drunk - anyway, the next thing I heard was the hissing. Very loud hissing, short bursts. Sounded mechanical. Hydraulic.

[Extended pause, but note intense nervous activity. The suggestion is that Summerfield wants to talk about her experiences, but there's some kind of emotional block stopping her. She needs a prompt. She wants a prompt. Hey, Quint! You know how you thought she might be primed to tell this story? Well...]

APOSTA: So where was the hissing coming from?

SUMMERFIELD: I didn't know. I kept walking. I was almost on top of the campsite before I worked out what was happening.

APOSTA: The ape people?

SUMMERFIELD: I didn't see them. Not then. When I got back to the camp, there was this one man - one of the stormtroopers - he started running towards me. He was waving his arms, and... I don't remember what he was shouting. I think I could hear Katastrophen. Giving orders.

APOSTA: But you didn't see who was attacking you?

SUMMERFIELD: No. No. There were shadows. At the other side of the camp. I don't think I even had a clue what they were. The soldiers were everywhere, they were scattering like virgelopes, they -

APOSTA: What about your companions? Were they still at the camp?

SUMMERFIELD: I think I saw Lucretia. It was hard to follow what was going on. There was only the firelight. But yes. Lucretia was at the camp. I saw her ducking. I know, because I remember thinking she'd been shot by something, but...

APOSTA: How about Mr Misnomer?

[Summerfield's visibly uncomfortable by now. Sudden increase in tension levels. There's a long silence before she opens her mouth again.]

SUMMERFIELD: The next thing I remember, there was the gas. spurts of gas. That was what was making the hissing.

APOSTA: OK. Tell me about the gas.

SUMMERFIELD *[sudden irritation]*: It was the ape things, obviously. That's when I started to work out what they were. They were holding things. Weapons. Like needles. Long needles. The gas was being let out of the ends of these needles. Very short, very controlled bursts. The gas was... bright. Luminescent. Like little sparkly clouds. That's why I could see the shapes properly. I could see their faces.

APOSTA: What were their faces like?

[Increased agitation on the nervegram.]

SUMMERFIELD: Intelligent. Human. No, not human. But more like people than monkeys. Their eyes, especially. Something about their eyes.

APOSTA: But they were shooting at you with gas? I don't get what kind of weapons -

SUMMERFIELD: The first man I'd seen, the soldier... I don't remember where he was standing, but I remember seeing him right in front of one of the apes. He drew his gun. The needle was in his face before he could pull the trigger. The gas was everywhere. All around him. And then the cloud cleared, and I thought he was going to be dead, or eaten away by acid, that kind of thing. But he wasn't. There was a cube. Like a block of ice. And the soldier was frozen inside it.

APOSTA: I'm not sure I'm getting all this, Ms... erm... Professor Summerfield. This gas...

SUMMERFIELD: Don't ask me. I don't know what it was. Maybe the same stuff they use in suspended-animation units. Did I tell you about Kryptosa's journal? Ash and Lucretia found the journal sealed in the same material. Anyway, there was gas everywhere. I was... confused. I tried running. I think.

APOSTA: Yeah, but you said the soldiers had guns...

SUMMERFIELD: Everyone had been taken by surprise, I think. By the time the battle really started, there were only a couple of soldiers left. There were a lot of ape people. I don't know how many. It felt like they were everywhere. I don't know. I just -

[The end of the statement's abrupt. Presumably, this is the part of the narrative she has trouble dealing with. The extreme anxiety makes precise emotional analysis difficult, so don't blame me if it all gets vague here, OK?]

APOSTA: What happened next?

[No reply.]

APOSTA: Professor? What happened next?

SUMMERFIELD: Mr Misnomer...

APOSTA: What about him?

SUMMERFIELD: I...

[Another pause. Stress levels stay constant.]

SUMMERFIELD: There was a gun. On the ground. SSSSSSS rifle. One of the men... one of the soldiers must have dropped it.

APOSTA: What did Mr Misnomer do, Professor?

SUMMERFIELD *[sudden anger]*: What do you think? I... saw him reach down... it... I don't know. It looked... comfortable... the way he was holding it...

APOSTA: He started shooting? Is that what happened? Mr Misnomer started shooting?

SUMMERFIELD: He started shooting. Yes.

APOSTA: What did he start shooting at?

SUMMERFIELD *[increased anger]*: The apes! The bloody apes! I mean, what else? They were... the way they looked. Eyes. Intelligent. And he... blood. I remember. The way he was holding the gun, I...

[Nervegram readings start to settle into a new pattern here. Summerfield's change of mood is pretty obvious: distressed instead of anxious. Hard to say why.]

APOSTA: You're upset, right?

[No response.]

APOSTA: What're you upset about?

SUMMERFIELD: What do you think?

APOSTA: Well, I don't -

SUMMERFIELD: They looked so surprised. Like they hadn't expected...

APOSTA: Is it Mr Misnomer?

[Sudden leap in adrenaline levels.]

SUMMERFIELD: What?

APOSTA: Is that what upsets you, the way Mr Misnomer started shooting? Is it because he's the hero?

SUMMERFIELD: The... I don't know what you're talking about.

APOSTA: The hero. He's supposed to be the hero of your story, right? He's supposed to be, y'know, the good guy. Is that why you're upset?

[Summerfield starts to laugh. Again, hard to say why. Nothing funny's going on here, and Summerfield's nervegram doesn't suggest actual hysteria.]

APOSTA: What did I say?

[Interview interrupted at this point, 14:21:36, by the return of Chief Officer Q. Pupp. Great timing, Quint.]

PUPP: Professor Summerfield. It looks like you're not alone.

SUMMERFIELD *[laughter ends]*: What?

PUPP: Two of your associates. They've turned up at McClure's Atoll, Professor. Safe and well.

SUMMERFIELD: Ash and Lucretia. It's Ash and Lucretia, isn't it?

PUPP *[to Aposta]*: Thank you, Constable. You can go now.

SUMMERFIELD: Tell me. Is it Ash and Lucretia? Is it?

PUPP: Let's carry on with your story.

SUMMERFIELD: Tell me!

PUPP: There's no need to get excited, Professor. You tell me what you know, and I'll tell you what I know. I think that's reasonable. *[God, Quint, you can be a real bastard at times, you know that?]*

SUMMERFIELD *[reluctantly]*: I need a drink. I need water.

PUPP: All right. You can have a drink. And then you can tell me the rest of the story. Fair?

'DIRIGIBLES OF DEATH'

Guhh - Guhh - Guhh, went the primitives. It was supposed to be a chant, in honour of whatever deity they worshipped around here, but the 'gravitational distortion' that had mutilated their bodies had done even worse things to their vocal cords.

The clearing was huge, too large to make out the perimeter from here. Ash started thinking about *Rex Havoc and the Island of Lost Promises*, with its holovid imagery ripped off of the old 2D *King Kong* movies. This, she decided, was the kind of clearing Great Mombo the sixty-metre gorilla-god would be happy lounging around in. The space hadn't been made by the natives, or even trampled into existence by mammoths: the trees stopped at the perimeter of their own accord. Something to do with the gravity distortion, Ash guessed. It dragged the roots of the jungle towards its centre, but there was a point where the plants couldn't bear to be near it, and simply withered away.

The distortion itself was right in front of Ash's face, close enough for her to feel it pulling at her skin cells. From a distance, it had only been a slight glitch in the air, but up close it was a cone of space-time so out of synch with the rest of the world that all your senses were forced to lock on to it. How wide was it, here at the base? A hundred metres? More?

And there were things living inside the cone, floating in the null gravity, feeding and colliding in slow motion. An entire ecosystem. The creatures looked like small mammals, but they moved with the relaxed grace of tropical fish. Some of the jungle critters must have fallen into the cone, Ash reasoned, and had started to breed inside the zero-g there.

They'd evolved into things better suited to life in a world where the ground was somebody else's problem.

The altar stone was planted in the ground right in front of the cone's edge. It was a slab of grey rock, tilted at forty-five degrees, and Ash was tied to it with what felt like hair rope. She couldn't look over her shoulder, but she could hear the primitives behind her, gathered in their... dozens? Hundreds? On the far side of the cone, she could see pinpoints of orange, the torches of other cavemen, the light bent out of shape by the sick gravity between them and the altar stone.

Guhh - Guhh - Guhh - Guhh...

An altar. She was tied to an altar. In *Down Among the Dead Men*, Professor Summerfield had warned of the dangers of jumping to conclusions about alien cultures: what may look like a sacrificial dagger is often a mere cheese knife, Bernice had cautioned, and what may look like an act of barbarism is often an act of necessity. God almighty. Ash would have liked not to jump to any conclusions, but she was tied to an altar, and she couldn't think of any reason for that except -

Someone started screaming.

Ash twisted her head to the right. For the first time, she saw another altar stone, set into the ground a few metres away. She wondered if there were more of them, maybe arranged in a ring around the base of the cone. Several hunched figures clustered about the second stone, fussing with strands of rope, moving with all the elegance of wounded yaks. In the light from their torches, Ash saw a more streamlined figure among them, being bound to the stone. The firelight caught a pair of huge round eyes. Clothes of no particular colour slithered across the figure's torso, apparently trying to escape before they were sacrificed along with their owner.

Fos!ca was screaming. The sound was surprising, as if she hadn't screamed much before now, and wasn't sure how to do it properly. The primitives finished attaching her to the altar, then grunted off into the darkness.

'Fos!ca,' Ash called out. She hadn't spoken in a long, long time, and her voice didn't sound the way she remembered it.

Fos!ca kept screaming. Her chest was heaving under the psychosensitive suit, but she didn't sound at all tired. Evidently, the People had industrial-strength lungs.

'Fos!ca,' snapped Ash. 'For God's sake, shut up.'

Abruptly, Fos!ca fell silent. She turned to face Ash, and Ash saw that, despite the racket she'd been making, her face looked utterly calm.

'!X,' she said. The name was a sharp clicking sound over the background noise of the chanting. '!X can save us.'

'Guhhh,' snarled one of the primitives.

Ash would have jumped, if she'd had anywhere to jump to. The caveman had appeared from somewhere behind her, and now he was leaning over the altar stone, his face a couple of centimetres away from hers, his breath stinking of dead rodents. He was hideous, although in a very subtle way. His eyes, nose and mouth were all perfectly acceptable in themselves, but the distances between the features were all wrong. It was as if the skull had been fractured, the various pieces of bone pulled slightly out of place. Like a tectonic shift of the face.

'Aaagh,' said Ash, not unreasonably.

Lucretia ran, but not very quickly. Athletic ability – another desirable feature the authorities of Sarah-361 hadn't found in her. Lucretia Scannon, the walking sicknote.

When the camp had been attacked, her survival instincts had told her that lying down and looking helpless was always the best policy. She'd crawled to the edge of the camp on her stomach before she'd risked clambering to her feet again, and now she was making her way up the mountain trail, staying close to the rock face in the pitch darkness, putting as much distance as she could between herself and the things-that-hissed-in-the-shadows. She had no idea where she was going, of course. Even if she got away from the attackers, what chance would she have of making it back to Dellah on her own? How was she even going to get off the mountain?

Another cheery thought, she told herself, from the mind that brought you 'what if the cockroaches decide to take

over?’ and ‘we’re probably all going to die in a nuclear war anyway’.

Then she tripped. It wasn’t just a bit of a stumble, it was a full-on arse-over-tit dive. Something had been on the ground in front of her, and she’d run smack into it. She threw out her arms, but the fall was surprisingly soft. She realized this was because she’d fallen on to die thing, and the thing wasn’t very solid.

‘Ooof,’ said Lucretia.

‘Ooof,’ echoed the thing.

Ooof?

‘Um... hello?’ mumbled Lucretia.

‘Ah,’ said a flattened voice underneath her. ‘Miss Scannon, I assume.’

Lucretia rolled away from the talking blob. ‘Katastrophen?’

‘The very same.’ In the darkness, the *kommander* coughed, as if Lucretia had squashed his lungs and he was trying to reinflate them. ‘How is the battle going?’

‘Badly, when I left. Um. You decided to get out while you could, then?’

‘There’s an old saying about discretion and valour, Miss Scannon. And the mathematical relationship between the two.’

‘You mean, you ran away?’

A pause. Then a cough. ‘I can’t help noticing that you, too, elected to leave the battlefield.’

‘Yeah, but that’s different. I’m not a soldier.’

Another pause. In the silence, Lucretia listened to the noises from down the path. There was a shuffling, but nothing more distinct than that. She pictured the ape creatures dragging their frozen prisoners away, and wondered if Bernice was among them.

‘Neither am I,’ Katastrophen said. ‘The SSSSSSS is largely a political force, not a military one. The men are stormtroopers only in the metaphorical revolutionary sense.’

‘So you like the uniforms, but you’re too scared to get into any fights?’

‘Scared?’ Katastrophen tried to laugh, but it turned into a nasty splutter. Lucretia started to wonder if she’d actually damaged him at all by falling on him. ‘Would it surprise you to learn, Miss Scannon, that I was at the hell camps on Darvilleva-Q? Would that shock you?’

Lucretia started to get to her feet. Really, she thought, I should be running. I don’t have time to talk politics, especially if the topic of discussion is the hell camps of Darvilleva.

Two million human colonists in the camps. Human-ish colonists. Not human enough for the colonial authorities on the edge of Earthspace. Genetically suspect, they’d said.

Genetically suspect. Pass rate of 34%. Non-ideal breeding stock. According to the First Demographic Charter of 2537, Lucretia Caroline Scannon should be subjected to mugenic therapy at the nearest opportunity. Areas of concern are -

‘Did you hear what I said?’ asked Katastrophen.

‘I heard.’ grumbled Lucretia. Grumbling was about as aggressive as she could get. ‘The hell camps. No. It doesn’t surprise me. It’s what your kind do, isn’t it?’

‘You misunderstand. Darvilleva-Q was owned and managed by the Spirea Consortia. Nothing to do with the SSSSSSS.’ More coughing. ‘I was an inmate of the camps, Miss Scannon. Not a commandant.’

Lucretia blinked. She didn’t have to blink at all, in this light, but she blinked anyway. ‘You were...?’

‘An inmate. My DNA was found to be subhuman. A lie, of course. The testing mechanisms of the Darvillevans were arbitrary and eccentric. I spent four years in captivity. Four years spent among subhumans. In pain. In disease. Slowly coming to understand how little I shared with them, how unfair it was that I should have been numbered among them. The fear, Miss Scannon. They say prisoners condemned to death experience one moment of total anxiety, before they find peace. For me, that moment lasted four years. I know tear. And I am not afraid now.’

‘But you ran.’

‘Survival. The other thing you learn in the camps. You see this leg injury? No. Too dark, of course. I was wounded on the way to Darvilleva. Those who knew about such things told me it was infected. I would die if not treated. There were no facilities at the camp, no surgeons. I removed the infected material myself. I picked it out of my leg, piece by piece, day by day. I remember that pain. That pain is what made me who I am today. You understand?’

Lucretia didn’t like to point out that who he was today wasn’t very nice. ‘No. I don’t understand. Why are you telling me tills? I didn’t think you liked me.’

‘I don’t. But the leg injury is what caused me to fall. I can no longer move. I can go no further. Possibly, I should have stayed with the rest of the men. There is only so far one can run.’

The words disintegrated into an uncontrollable coughing fit. Lucretia stood in silence for a while. Finally, she leant over and wrapped one of her arms around Katastrophen’s shoulder.

‘Come on,’ she said.

‘Miss Scannon...?’

‘We’re getting out of here. Maybe we’ll find some kind of shelter up the mountain. Those things that attacked us... they might not be interested in a couple of stragglers. They might let us get away.’

She pulled Katastrophen to his feet. He collapsed against her, but she managed to rest his shoulder against the rock face and keep her balance. Slowly, Lucretia began to walk. Although Katastrophen must have lost his cane at some point, he managed to support himself as he hobbled along. Lucretia tried not to notice the smell of old sweat and bitter aftershave. She didn’t feel comfortable being this close to anyone, let alone him.

The hissing went on. Bernice wasn’t sure who was left for the ape people to shoot at. She’d seen most of the SSSSSSS men vanish in puffs of gas, to be replaced with big fascist-flavoured icicles. Most of the canned campfires had been

knocked over and extinguished, turning what was left of the battle into a muddle of shadows.

The only thing she could focus on was Mr Misnomer. He stood at the centre of the camp, one fist clenched by his side, the other gripping the SSSSSSS gun, firing the rifle one-handed, as only a pulp adventurer could. Every now and then, one of his gunshots would throw a burst of light across the scene, illuminating the bodies around him in (lashes of gunpowder lightning. The bodies were simian, the broken forms of the ape creatures. In one of the flashes, Bernice caught sight of a corpse right at Misnomer's feet, the skull blown open. The left side of its face, the only side that remained, looked... well, it looked hurt. Stupid, she knew, but that was how it looked. Offended, more than anything else.

And yes, the creatures had attacked them, as yes, they were armed as well, and yes, Mr Misnomer hadn't done anything that most of the rest of the universe wouldn't have done, in his position. But...

Then he was moving towards her, wading through the bodies, the guttering light from the campfires turning him into a series of orange-tinted snapshots, like frames from a kinematograph or panels in a comic book. By the time he reached Bernice, the gun had vanished into his belt. One of his gauntlets clamped itself around her wrist. The air around them was lit by a cloud of sparkling dust, and the gas started to creep into Bernice's throat, putting the taste of aniseed on the back of her tongue.

The primitive stepped back and pulled a wooden mask down over his face. The mask had been strapped to the top of his head, and the design was pretty rudimentary: two round holes for eyes, a single scratchmark for a mouth, a pair of nodes at the temples that might have been horns. Ash concentrated on these little details, more than anything else to stop herself concentrating on the implement in the caveman's hand.

'Help us,' said Fos!ca, suddenly.

‘No,’ someone replied.

Ash shot a glance in her direction. !X had appeared, casually wandering into view near Fos!ca’s altar stone. He looked as he always did, blank-faced and collected, though some kind of garland had been draped around his neck. The plants that made up the garland were sickly, misshapen, covered in thorns. The flowers of the gravity cone, Ash realized. In his arms, he was cradling an object she didn’t recognize. It was silver, needle-like, about forty centimetres in length. It gave Ash the distinct impression of being a weapon.

‘You,’ Ash blurted. ‘You led them to us. You told them to capture us.’

‘Yes,’ said !X.

‘Why, for Kryste’s sake?’

‘I told you. These are my people.’

‘Your people? How the hell can they be your people? They’re nothing Like you.’ Even as she said it, her eyes drifted back to the primitive standing over her. His attention was fixed on !X, two wet and loving eyes peering out from behind the mask.

The mask. Two holes for eyes and...

‘I’m not speaking genetically,’ !X explained. ‘Perhaps it’s more accurate to say we’re both part of the same process. We have a certain understanding.’

‘They think you’re a god?’ asked Fos!ca, sounding slightly awed.

‘Not exactly. There are two tribes here, if I understand Kryptosa’s journal correctly. These primitives are an offshoot of the Tribe of Gug. Exiles. However, they’ve picked up most of their customs from the Tribe of Lilith. They worship the same deity. The deity who rules this domain from the centre of the world. MEPHISTO.’

Ash opened her mouth to ask how !X knew about Kryptosa’s journal, but decided not to bother. She’d been carrying the book in one of her eezy-zip pockets. !X could easily have nicked it when she’d been captured.

!X indicated the object in his hands with a nod of his head. 'The Tribe of Lilith has a far more complex form of technology at its disposal. This weapon is a product of that technology. The exiles captured it. They treat it as a holy relic. Hence their decision to entrust it into my keeping, as an icon of power. They recognize me as an avatar of MEPHISTO.'

'And what about us?' Ash managed to gargle.

!X thought about that for a while.

'You die here,' he announced. Then he turned away and walked out of sight.

Guhh - Guhh - Guhh...

'I don't understand,' said Fos!ca. Her voice was tiny and childlike. Hurt. Lost. Ash didn't have much time to be sympathetic. The primitive in the mask had hardly moved while !X had been speaking, but now he was getting excited again, chanting along with his tribe, muscles tightening and relaxing to a quick, steady rhythm. Ash was reminded of a martial artist, steeling himself before karate-chopping a brick. Finally, the caveman raised his left hand, the one holding the cutting tool. It was a chunk of black rock, a lot like the silicrete of McClure's Atoll, sharpened to a point at one end. Not exactly a sacrificial dagger, but it would do the same job.

Right up until the very last second, Ash was trying to think of ways to get out of this mess, but all the options came straight out of the pulpzines. She considered the possibility that the sacrifice was only a symbolic one, that the blade might not be real. She considered the possibility that Bernice, or even Mr Misnomer, might burst out of the foliage in the nick of time and rescue her. She even considered the possibility that this would all turn out to be a dream sequence.

The primitive swung the blade down towards her chest. None of these possibilities became a reality.

Funnily enough, the darkness didn't seem so bad as Lucretia dragged Katastrophen up the path. The sun wasn't getting

any brighter above them, but the path curved around the side of the mountain as they shambled along, so Lucretia guessed

there was some kind of light source just around the bend.

‘Miss Scannon?’ Katastrophen said, finally breaking the grumpy silence.

‘Mmm?’

‘You are not an intelligent human being.’

‘Um, sorry?’

‘The intelligent move is to make your own way up the mountain. My presence effectively halves your speed.’

For a moment, Lucretia felt quite proud of herself. ‘Well, yeah. But I’m not leaving you behind. That’s the difference between you and me, I suppose.’

‘No it isn’t. Miss Scannon. To risk your life for the life of a friend or compatriot is the most noble thing a true human being can do. But I am not your friend.’

‘I know. But I can’t just -’

‘Listen to me.’ Katastrophen was rasping wildly, and Lucretia wondered if there was actually something wrong with his lungs. ‘I am not your friend. And you would not have given me a second thought, had I not told you a hard-luck story. This is not noble. This is merely pathetic. You’ve become a victim of pity, as I suspected you would.’

It took Lucretia a while to find the words. ‘Wait a minute. You mean, all that stuff you told me about the hell camps... that was a lie?’

He didn’t answer at once. ‘Whether it’s true or not is immaterial. The important thing is, I only told the story so you would agree to help me. You did as I wished.’ He nodded to himself. ‘It is a very human thing. We tell people only those parts of our histories that move them to our advantage. Your associate, the professor, feels it was wrong of the SSSSSSS to attempt to rewrite history, as we did with the Jonson’s Engine project. But she would do the same. She *does* do the same.’

‘Why are you telling me this?’ said Lucretia.

‘Light,’ said Katastrophen.

The answer made no sense to her, at least for a few moments. Then, as they moved along and around the mountain trail, a small speck of light came into view. Katastrophien seemed to have detected it before it had become visible to the naked eye. They hobbled on, Lucretia making her way towards the edge of the pathway to get a better look. Eventually, she figured out where the light was coming from.

They'd finally circled the mountain, and were standing on the side facing the second peak, where Bernice had claimed the plateau of the Tribe of Lilith was to be found. Whether or not there really was a plateau suddenly seemed academic. What held Lucretia's attention was the gulf between the two mountains.

The gulf was inhabited. Tunnels had been bored into the rock on the opposite side; at first, she thought they were Gug tunnels, but the cave openings here were far smoother around the edges, and positioned with a geometric precision you wouldn't expect from a bunch of cavemen. There were hundreds of the openings, literally hundreds, the rock face being fronted by a scaffold of artificial ledges, the platforms linked together by stairways of rope and wood.

And there were lights. Lots of lights. The glow they'd spotted came from a cluster of red Chinese lanterns, suspended above one of the larger cavern entrances. More of these clusters came into view as Lucretia edged along the path, some hanging from walkways, some dangling in the tunnels themselves. The light wasn't strong, but it was bright enough to let her see the things that moved across the ledges, the silhouettes passing in front of the lanterns, casting long, spidery shadows across the gulf. Their faces were impossible to make out, but Lucretia recognized them by the way they moved, the shuffling gait that wasn't quite human, but wasn't without elegance, either. The ape creatures. They lived in caves, then, but they clearly had some form of civilization.

Civilization? Did that mean -

Lucretia's thoughts were interrupted by a bulky – almost rectangular – silhouette, which passed in front of one of the cave mouths and blanked out a whole cluster of lanterns. Then it was gone. Lucretia realized it had been another of the apes, hurling itself from one of the walkways and falling towards the bottom of the gulf. She thought of lemmings, and of that infamous antique Disney vid-footage, when an overzealous camera crew had thrown whole bunches of the animals off a cliff just to get good pictures of their 'mass suicide'. Then a second ape followed the first over the edge, and Lucretia saw thick flaps of skin unfolding between its arms and legs. Oh God. Some of these things could fly. Well, sort of fly. They could glide from level to level, from mountain to mountain...

Something nudged Lucretia in the ribs. She glanced at Katastrophen. The *kommander* had been painted red by the lamplight, but, even so, Lucretia could tell his face had gone pale. He was looking straight up. She followed his gaze.

An enormous shadow lurched across the sky. Lucretia felt something pop in her stomach, the first of those little biological barriers that stop human beings retching their guts out at every opportunity.

Lucretia's earliest memory was of being taken to the regene zoo at the age of eighteen months. She had an unforgettable image burned into her nervous system, of sitting in a pushchair in front of the manta ray tank. The memory of thinking to herself: no. Just, no. Nothing should be that big, that dark, that *suffocating*. Her earliest memory. Sitting in the middle of the zoo aquarium hall and screaming herself sick.

This was worse. Something big and dark and suffocating, but hovering right above her head, its underside lit by the glow of the lanterns. The shape was easily sixty metres from tip to tail. It was a lot like a zeppelin, one of those blimps people liked to see hovering over astrobowl stadiums, but it was alive – you could smell it even from here. The scent of its skin, ancient and leathery, strange musks being given off by its swollen glands. Its surface was covered with snakeskin,

mottled by ridges in dark reptilian colours, pockmarked as if by bad weather. Four stunted limbs dangled uselessly from its underside, each one ending in a set of webbed fingers. At one end of its body was what looked like a head. A lizard-like skull with huge glowing eyes...

But they weren't eyes, were they? They were panes of glass, pale electrical light shining out from the other side. Inside the skull, you could see the blimp creature's brain, a withered sac surrounded by a lattice of electrical cables. In front of the brain were two of the ape creatures. Sitting. Sitting inside the head. They even had little chairs.

'Buffo frogs,' whispered Katastrophen.

'Whuuuh?' said Lucretia, which was the best she could do right now.

'Buffo frogs can inflate themselves to huge sizes. They can fill their throats with gas. Make themselves appear larger to predators. Many fish species have similar abilities.' He sounded overawed, but still rational.

'But it can fly,' Lucretia gabbled. 'It can *fly*.'

Katastrophen nodded slowly, like a man experiencing a revelation. 'Given large enough glands, and the correct form of gas. But no such beast could evolve naturally. Not even here. The animal must have been force-bred. See how stunted the limbs are. Its ancestors can't have walked on the ground for generations.'

A dirigible, thought Lucretia. That's what it is. A living dirigible, with its head hollowed out and a control unit planted in its brain. The shadow overhead lurched, then descended a little. Lucretia experienced a moment of utter atavistic terror, the sight of the thing fooling her neuroses into thinking the sky was falling. As the airship/dinosaur came closer to the pathway, Lucretia saw that its skin was ruptured in places, and that the rips had been repaired by -

Something else popped inside her gut. The second line of defence was down. A couple more shocks like that and she'd be pumping her lunch all over the mountainside.

'THE CAVERNS OF CREEPING NEUROSIS!'

Bernice felt something press into the small of her back. She tumbled forward, over the low lip of rock she hadn't previously been aware of and into the mouth of the tunnel. Behind her, there was a short hydraulic hiss, the air lighting up with tiny speckles of vapour. The gas from the apes' stasis weapons filled the cave with a pale blue glow, tracing the outlines of cartoon stalactites above her head.

She rolled over as soon as she hit the ground. Mr Misnomer was standing in the cave mouth behind her, following her in. Bernice no longer had to see him to know he was there. Maybe it was a pheromone thing.

Then the hissing started again. She felt Misnomer sweep towards her head, and for a moment she thought he was going to stomp on her face. Instead, his hand shot out towards her scalp, his fingers closing around some of the longer strands of hair. Bernice was still trying to remember how to yelp when she realized he was trying to drag her along by her fringe.

'Come on,' she heard him rasp. 'Come on, you dozy bitch.'

Bernice flapped her arms around uselessly, tears welling up in her eyes. It wasn't the pain she resented. It was the fact that it was such a *childish* sort of pain. She felt her backside scraping along the floor of the tunnel.

'What the... hell... do you think you're... doing?' she managed to cough.

Mr Misnomer let go, but only after dragging her to her feet by her forelocks. 'I'm trying to keep you alive. Shut up and try to act like a proper sidekick.'

'Do you still have the gun?'

‘What?’

‘I said, do you still -’

More light. Not the gas. this time. A gunpowder flash, the standard chemical reaction when you tired a Derenna Corp Mock-Antique Range projectile weapon. In that brief moment of brilliance, Bernice saw Mr Misnomer standing in front of her, the snarl still hanging under his nose, his gun aimed at the mouth of the tunnel. His firing posture came straight off the cover of a pulpzine.

She turned to see what he was shooting at. In the afterglow of the flash she could make out a hairy, gangling shape, collapsing in the blackness. It was well inside the tunnel, not near the entrance, as she might have expected, as if it had leapt from the cave mouth to their position in a single step. She thought she heard it sigh pitifully as it hit the ground.

‘Stop shooting at them!’ she shrieked. She didn’t hear the words herself. She was deaf from the gunshot. ‘It’s the Tribe of Lilith, for heaven’s sake! Stop shooting!’

There was a moment’s silence in the darkness. By now, Mr Misnomer would be looking at her in a bemused fashion. ‘They’re a bunch of gorillas,’ he said.

‘You’re not thinking,’ Bernice snapped. ‘You’ve seen the weapons they’re using. They’re not animals.’

‘Weapons. Good point.’ She sensed Misnomer kneeling down, scrabbling about on the floor. ‘OK, if they’re not animals, what are they?’

‘They’re yeti.’

‘They’re what?’

‘Yeti. They’re a lot like the old yeti species on Earth. Don’t you get it? They’ve developed a complex culture, just like the Earth yeti would’ve done if *Homo sapiens* hadn’t beaten them back into the Himalayas. We can’t keep killing them.’

‘In case you hadn’t noticed. Professor, they started it. Look out.’

Bernice swung around. She could see the shapes congregating at the entrance to the tunnel, silhouetted against a background of blue gas particles that hung in the air and refused to go away. They weren’t getting any closer.

Possibly, they'd decided the best strategy was to wait it out by the cave mouth. Did that mean this tunnel was a dead end?

The cave lit up again. Mr Misnomer had retrieved a stasis gun from the dead yeti at his feet, and was pointing it at the entrance, spraying gas towards the creatures there. Bernice saw their eyes sparkling in the light before they withdrew.

Mr Misnomer took his finger off the trigger. 'That should make 'em think. There's some kind of control at the blunt end of this thing. Could have a "kill" setting as well as a "freeze" setting.'

'You don't care, do you?' spat Bernice. 'You don't give a monkey's whether they're intelligent or not. You aren't even slightly curious about what it is they're after.'

'Still want to keep my rear end in one piece,' Mr Misnomer told her. 'Maybe when you're ninety-six years old, you'll start losing your principles, too. In the meantime, we've got to find another way out of this place. Let's move.'

There was a sound that wasn't exactly a gunshot. A line stretched through the air above Ash's head. Not a beam, just a straight line, as if God had reached down with a pencil and a ruler and bisected the air. The line ended at the primitive's chest. Ash saw the skin above his ribcage pop open before he fell. He hit the ground with a sound that said 'dead'.

And all Ash could think was: It's the cavalry. The cavalry coming over the hill.

There were other not-quite-gunshot noises, and Ash imagined more of the lines, a whole network of them criss-crossing the clearing. On the far side of the gravity cone, points of firelight bobbed and danced, the movements of startled cavemen, waving the torches in their hands. The lines extended across the clearing, through the cone and out the other side. The torches fell, one by one.

There were gruntings and groanings in the darkness. The chanting faded away, replaced by the rhythm of heavy weights hitting the ground. 'Dead', 'dead', 'dead', 'dead', 'dead'.

Then the clearing was filled with the kind of silence war correspondents are always going on about in their memoirs. The perfect moment of peace just after the sniper's been taken out.

!X appeared in front of Ash, still cradling the needle, inspecting the wide end in his hands.

'Interesting,' he said.

He left it at that, for a while. Ash held her breath.

'Multiple settings,' !X continued. 'The product of an artefact-obsessed culture. A toy for killing with.'

'You killed them?' said Ash. She made the mistake of trying to breathe in while speaking instead of breathing out, so the sentence sounded very silly indeed.

!X didn't look up at her. 'Yes.'

'All of them ? The whole tribe?'

'All that were here.'

'I thought... you wanted them to kill us.' God, this conversation was so stupid. He wasn't threatening her, he wasn't rescuing her. What the hell was he doing?

'No. I promised another demonstration.' He looked towards the other altar stone, where Fos!ca was watching the conversation with interest. Interest; not even horror. Ash saw a dead native crumpled on the ground in front of her, another sacrificial dagger-rock clenched in his fist.

'There's so little genuine anxiety where she comes from,' !X went on. 'No fear of mortality. No sense of *wrongness*. The People have no concept of "threat". Do you understand now? All the things they lost when they built their Utopia. All the neuroses that define the cultures of other species. All these things are made manifest in me. The reason I exist. The reason I'm here.'

'You've terrified her, that's all you've done. You've scared her shitless. It's a primitive brainwashing technique, most psycho-killers do it. It's a power thing.' Ash tried to make eye contact with Fos!ca, to form some emotional link between them, but Fos!ca was watching her like she was a zoo exhibit.

'She's not scared. She's alive.' Without warning, !X lifted the needle weapon and pressed it against the centre of Ash's

forehead. Every nerve in Ash's body seized up. There was a tension in the device, as if the mechanism inside it was winding itself to breaking point, getting ready to fire.

And in Ash's forebrain, a little ticktocking thing was saying: This is it, I'm going to die, I'm going to die, oh God no, I want to live, I want to, I don't know why but I want to, I don't care how shit life is or how many essays I've got to hand in before the end of the year or how I'm going to tell Lucretia to back off a little, I don't care I want to live that's all.

The way ticktocking things do.

'In this one moment, you understand life better than at any other time in your existence,' said !X. 'You see?'

'I thought I was going to die,' said Fos!ca.

The words were delivered without feeling. Suddenly, all eyes were on her. !X lowered the needle.

'I thought I was going to die,' Fos!ca repeated. 'That's all.' Then she looked away, as if the subject no longer interested her.

!X walked towards her altar stone. 'Yes. You were less than a second away from having your ribcage broken and your heart torn out. You're very lucky. Most of the People never experience that. As I said. I promised a demonstration.'

He slid the weapon into his belt - Ash hadn't noticed the belt before, so it was probably a symbiotic costume thing - and started untying Fos!ca. 'We had a war,' he said as he worked. 'I say "we", meaning my species. We fought a race of aliens. Insects from C-Mita-C-Mita-Rho. The ones who fought in the war saw terrible things. They came back to the worldsphere... "scarred", I think is the word. The Do[EO]C was busier than at any time in its history. In the first few years, there was a record rate of autotermination in the worldsphere. There were even murders. Can you imagine that? And what nobody liked to admit was that everything seemed to make so much more sense once the war was over. A defining moment in the culture of the People. By which all other events could be measured.'

Fos!ca slithered free of the ropes, and stood in front of the gravity cone, her face a portrait of shell shock in olive and

brown. She made no attempt to get away from !X. !X himself stepped forward, right into the cone.

'I was sent here for a reason,' he said, looking up towards the extinguished sun. He made some kind of muscular movement Ash couldn't quite catch. The next thing she knew, he was drifting upward in the zero-g.

'Wait a minute,' said Ash. 'Wait a minute, what about me?'

'You're not necessary.'

She started struggling against her bonds, more to make a point than anything else. 'You can't leave me like this,' she began, but she didn't even bother waiting for !X to interrupt her. Of course he could leave her like this. He could do whatever he wanted. Ash thought of calling to Fos!ca for help, but Fos!ca was already walking into the gravity cone behind him. Slowly, she began to drift away from the ground as well.

Everything started to go dark. Ash had only been able to see because of the firelight, but now the torches, lying on the damp ground around her, were flickering out.

'Don't leave me, for Kryste's sake,' said Ash, uselessly. 'Listen. I'll beg. I'll be scared. Whatever you like. Don't leave me, all right?'

!X didn't respond. He floated away from her, beyond the reach of the dying torchlight, up into the darkness. Fos!ca vanished after him.

'Please!' screeched Ash. 'Listen, I'm begging you! I'm begging you, you bastard! Let me go!'

'I'm only guilty of making your lives more interesting,' said !X, his voice drifting down from up above. 'Possibly, you'll learn. Or maybe you'll die first. I don't know.'

Then the final torch went out. Ash was left alone with the night and the silence.

There were muscles going into spasm at the back of Fos!ca's eye. It was all the fault of the secondary lens, trying to push itself into position, desperate to prove it could see in the dark better than the primary one. Fos!ca tried to remember whether the lens was supposed to think for itself like that.

The null gravity, she knew, was doing funny things to her synapses. Your body gets so used to gravity, all the sensory systems fall apart when there suddenly isn't any. The last thing she remembered focusing on had been a rock, suspended in air that no longer felt the pressing urge to stay at ground level. The rock had been inhabited by small mammals - most of which had forgotten how to use their legs - and peppered with flowers from which weightless spores would occasionally explode, tumbling gracefully through the ether. The rock had been a tiny planet with its own tiny ecosystem.

This was *real*. This world of monsters and impossibilities. It felt hard, dangerous, solid. Everything else, the soft and safe things she'd grown up with in the worldsphere, suddenly seemed as vague as holograms or old memories. And !X...

!X was the realest thing of all.

So this was how it felt to be alive.

To know you could die. One primitive could tear out your heart. One uncontrolled animal, without God or the Strange Biology Interest Group to remove its carnivorous instincts, could bite through your throat in moments.

The lens finally struggled to the front of Fos!ca's eye, letting tiny droplets of blood escape into the gravity cone. Fos!ca looked up, and saw the pure blaze of light hovering above her, ascending the cone faster than she could follow.

Fos!ca pushed against the air with her legs, willing herself to move faster. She had to follow him. Without him, she was lost in a kind of universe she'd never even known existed.

Kommander Ernst Katastrophen, leader of the South of Smarley's World branch of the SSSSSSS and instigator of the Davidson Youth movement, had 'The Ride of the Valkyries' cycling through his head. This was a terminal cliché even by his standards. Most of the men in the SSSSSSS liked to model themselves after the National Socialists they'd seen in the few remaining historical documents on twentieth-century fascism: Riefenstahl's *The Triumph of the Will*, Spier's *Inside the Third Reich*, Brookes's *The Producers*. But Katastrophen

drew the line at pretending to like Wagner. Even so, there it was, like a hurricane between his ears. Dan da-da daaaaaaaah dah, dan da-da daaaaaaaah dah, dan da-da daaaaaaaah dah...

He simply couldn't help it. Seeing the dirigible hanging overhead was like seeing the Valkyries themselves sweep over the horizon, or like watching the mother ship turn up at the end of an old SF holovid. It wasn't just the look of the thing. The ship had a presence, the kind of presence you only felt around a living organism. It was close now, hovering no more than ten metres above the mountain path, its skin almost scraping the rock face. From this distance, Katastrophen could make out the uneven patches on its underbelly. What he saw nearly took his breath away.

Ape creatures. The ones that flew, with membranes of skin between their arms and legs. The beasts had been stitched to the surface of the dirigible like leather patches, until it wasn't clear where the apes ended and the great reptile began. Over the years, the dirigible had been damaged, and repaired with living tissue. The neurosystems of the apes had doubtless been tied into the neurosystem of the vessel; Katastrophen had seen something similar on Harato, where the word 'ship' was synonymous with the word 'pilot'. The dirigible had a single mind, then, made up of the minds of the subhuman dungs that had repaired it.

How old was the vehicle? Centuries, perhaps? Generations of aerial combat experience, wired into a single neurosystem... dear gods, if ever there was a time to sing Wagner, it was now.

'Who made it?' he found himself saying, his eyes close to forming tears. 'Who? Who?'

Next to him, the Scannon woman shrugged lamely. 'The apemen, I suppose. They're piloting it.'

Katastrophen almost felt like laughing. 'They are subhuman. No. Some greater mind has made this miracle. A mind that must use the apes as its servitors. Bioengineering on this scale... beyond anything even the greatest geneticists

of the human race have achieved... it is a dream. A living dream.'

'Is your accent slipping?'

Katastrophen wasn't listening. 'If the SSSSSSS can achieve such knowledge, such purity, such strength...'

'Oh. Um.'

The *kommander* became aware that Scannon was raising her hands above her head. He turned. Three pairs of dark, not-quite-human eyes leered at him out of the gloom.

The apes had come from out of nowhere. However distracting the dirigible had been, Katastrophen's glasses were supposed to have an inbuilt motion-proximity detection system, and the apes hadn't triggered it at all. But they were standing right behind him, stasis needles at the ready, frowns stitched across their faces. Buck naked, as befitted animals with no shame.

He started moving before he even knew what he was doing. Possibly some instinct left over from Darvilleva-Q; he still couldn't keep his temper, not if he was surrounded by subhumans. His hand lashed out, attempting to push one of the needles aside. The apes' fingers tightened around the ends of their weapons.

Before his fist even made contact, Scannon's hand was wrapped around his arm. Her grip was weak, but the shock of seeing her move so fast was enough to stop Katastrophen dead. She looked as surprised as he did.

'Er,' she said. 'I don't think that's a good idea.'

Without warning, the air broke open behind the three apes. The molecules that made up the local atmosphere were roughly elbowed aside, and something solid was neatly slotted into the space. It was a fourth ape. This one was wearing a long robe, the kind of thing a monk might wear, except in a lurid orange. Its great grey beard spilt out over its collar, and it had big white tufts on either side of its head, reminding Katastrophen of some mad old uncle or other.

'Teleporters,' Katastrophen hissed. The word made Scannon flinch, for some reason.

Then she squealed in disgust, as something dry but simultaneously slippery fell from the sky. It was a strip of skin, not unlike snakeskin, dangling from the bottom of the dirigible. A ladder, leading up to the belly of the craft.

‘I think they want us to climb,’ Scannon whimpered.

Katastrophen shook his head. ‘It makes no sense. These beasts have matter transmission at their disposal. No wonder the attack on the camp was so effective

Lucretia was actually shuddering. ‘Please.’ she said. ‘Can we talk about something else?’

Katastrophen decided to ignore her. He briefly wondered if he was actually starting to like the girl. After all, he was actively deciding to ignore her now, instead of doing it automatically. ‘They have transmat technology. Yet they want us to climb. Could they not simply “beam us up”? Ouch.’

That last comment was prompted by an ape who’d grown bored with the discussion and jabbed Katastrophen in a particularly sensitive spot. Scannon grabbed hold of the skin strip. The *kommander* noticed deep indentations in the skin, handy handholds. He also noticed the look of sheer revulsion on Scannon’s face when she touched the material.

‘You’re the one who thinks they’re subhuman,’ she muttered, as she started to climb. ‘Maybe they don’t know how to work the transmat properly.’

it’s possible,’ mused Katastrophen, nodding towards the robed ape. ‘They are, after all, clearly uncultured. They no doubt dress in this fashion in mockery of higher life forms.’

‘Or maybe I just like satin,’ grunted the robed ape.

‘Ah,’ said Katastrophen. ‘I see. Yes.’

'THE HORROR! THE HORROR!'

!X could see the surface of the sun from this distance. The only light came from the archescape below, where rivers of lava covered the far mountains with an ugly orange glow and red speckles marked the areas where native life forms had built settlements. Naturally, !X didn't need light: there were more than enough sensory enhancements in his skull to compensate for the darkness. The surface of the sun was an upside-down landscape hanging above his head, a plain of dull brown rock covered in jagged canyons. When the sun shone, he reasoned, light and liquid plasma would seep out of those cracks.

The distortion cone, by his estimation, hadn't been in existence for long. Some form of artificial-gravity system must have been set up on Tyler's Folly, hence the peculiar duality of the surface and the interior. Presumably, the system had malfunctioned. That would explain the recent earthquakes, the ruptures in the crust, and the existence of the cone: a glitch in the interior gravity. But if the glitch had been around for long - say, more than a few months it would have done far more damage to the stability of the environment.

Yet the creatures inhabiting the cone, the mammals with stunted limbs and the birds that had turned into balls of sharpened feathers with little or no muscle tissue, looked like they'd evolved over thousands of generations. Evolution worked quickly, but not this quickly.

Unless the rules were different here.

!X drifted past a floating bubble of water that a passing cloud must have emptied into the cone, only to find something large and flexible waiting for him on the other side. The animal looked like a transparent plastic sheet, and

!X could see bloodless organs floating in a biological jelly within its flat, diamond-shaped body. Astonishing camouflage. !X wondered what kind of being it had evolved from. A manta ray of some sort, possibly?

The sheet creature reached out for him, a razor-fine tendril coiling itself around his wrist. It started pulling him into the digestive creases of its body.

Act/speculate?

As he set about slaughtering the animal, !X worked through some calculations in his head. From the instruments of the bathosphere, he knew the diameter of this planet to be around 12,000 kilometres. (He was slightly put off that he was thinking in 'kilometres', evidently a local measurement, but he put it down to the cultural filter.) If he'd correctly estimated the size of the interior sun and the thickness of the crust, then at his current speed it should have taken him about twenty days, local time, to drift to the sun's surface.

He thoughtfully pulled the animal's tendril out of its socket. Twenty days. And yet the sun seemed within throwing distance already. More importantly, !X had known this would be the case, instinctively, even before he'd entered the cone.

The animal died. !X pushed its body away from him, watching it float off down the cone. Foslca was below him, somewhere, but !X had put all thoughts of her out of his mind. He continued his ascent.

So. Was there some dimensional distortion inside the planet, or did it go deeper than that? The archetypal quality of the underworld was obvious. Black holes are objects so dense that space-time collapses around them, !X mused. Perhaps the aesthetic concept of the Inner World was so heavy that reality itself bent to accommodate it. It took only a short time to reach the centre of the world because it was aesthetically *right* for it to take only a short time.

!X pulled himself to a halt, shifting his muscles in a manner subtle and controlled enough to overcome the inertia. Above his head, he could see the cone narrow to a point, no wider than his own body, as it met the sun. At the tip, there was a supradark hole in the surface of the rock.

Two shapes swam playfully around the space, their bodies stretched out of shape by the sick gravity.

Approach/observe?

After a few moments, they noticed him. The shapes spiralled away from the hole, becoming increasingly solid as they moved further from the sun. There were no clothes, or other signs of what the People liked to call 'civilization', but their bodies were covered in a dark and matted fur. Their skeletons seemed loose beneath their pelts, not held together by any solid joints or muscles. Exposure to the distortion had warped their bodies until they were almost liquid.

Attack/defend?

The nearest of the fluid apes blinked at him lovingly. It had excellent night vision, !X noted.

'We've been waiting,' it said.

'We were told to keep watch,' the other ape expanded. 'You *are* him, aren't you? The one we've been waiting for? The messenger of MEPHISTO?'

Combat/communication?

'I think so,' !X said. 'Tell me more.'

It couldn't really have been called a room. The floor was soft and squidgy, so Lucretia had to take short, careful steps to keep herself from overbalancing. It was like walking on a bouncy castle, although bouncy castles didn't usually have that undulating feel to them, like they were breathing. Lucretia felt like apologizing every time she moved.

She was standing on skin, inside the dirigible. Overhead there was a pink ceiling, run through with purple veins. The ceiling was high enough to allow her to stand, but low enough to make her feel claustrophobic. It was the real underside of the giant lizard, Lucretia realized. The creature had been bred so its thick reptilian skin hung loose from its belly, and that was what they were standing on now, in the space between the body and the outer dermis. The area had no walls; the floor sloped upward on either side, wrapping itself around the sides of the animal.

The space ran the length of the dirigible's body, more or less. Pieces of machinery had been installed here and there, welded to the inside of the skin, some apparently wired into the dirigible's nervous system. The place was lit by the same kind of red lanterns as had illuminated the settlement, each one dangling from a painful-looking metal spike.

The three creatures they'd been accosted by on the mountainside were still on guard duty, marching them towards the end of the chamber, where a hatchway was set into what looked like a wall of bone. The way to the skull, Lucretia guessed. More of the apes were lounging around the place, reclining against the sloping walls, chatting in low guttural tones or carefully biting their nails clean. The place sounded like a men's locker room, and, worse, it smelt like a men's locker room, full of sweat and dead skin.

Beside her, Katastrophen was trying to retain his dignity, but it was uphill work for him. What with the wound in his leg, his progress across the bouncy floor was almost laughable to watch. He had a grim, deadly serious look on his face, although his cheeks were slowly going vermillion.

He felt he was being humiliated. In front of 'subhumans', too. Lucretia wondered how long it would be before he snapped, like he'd almost snapped on the mountainside. God only knew how she'd managed to stop him then.

The guards stopped near the bone bulkhead. Lucretia shuffled closer to the *kommander*. 'What d'you think they're going to do with us?'

Katastrophen took a deep breath, evidently struggling to keep control of emotions. 'No doubt they intend to take us to their superiors.'

'You still think they're not intelligent?'

'Intelligence is relative, Miss Scannon. It isn't difficult teaching a monkey to do tricks.'

'And to talk?'

Katastrophen was about to reply when Lucretia caught a sudden movement out of the corner of her eye. Katastrophen saw it, too. They both turned.

Well, it hadn't really been a movement, as such. A robed ape, the one who'd appeared down on the mountain path, had been pushed into existence a few metres along the chamber. There, a circular metal plate had been set into the organic floor, sealed in place with some viscous bodily fluid or other. Welded to the wall next to the plate was a small metal box, covered in buttons marked with tiny hieroglyphs.

'Transmat platform,' Katastrophen hissed.

Lucretia actually hiccuped.

'Prepare yourself, Miss Scannon,' he murmured. 'If we need to make our escape, then...'

He kept talking, though Lucretia didn't hear him. Things in front of her face suddenly appeared to be a very long way away indeed. Lucretia had never fainted in her life, but she was sure that if she had, this was how she would have felt a few nanoseconds beforehand. She grasped the first solid object that came to hand. It was warm and leathery.

The next time she found herself capable of conscious thought, she was on her knees. There were hairy faces hovering over her, silver needles being aimed uncertainly at her head.

'Is she unwell?' asked a decidedly non-human voice.

'Don't kill me,' Lucretia burred. 'Don't kill me.'

The apes around her looked at each other in a bemused fashion. Lucretia tried to close her eyes, but couldn't. She focused on what was beyond them. The metal plate, sitting there, smugly, like a great big... thing. She could see it glowing. Crackling. Or was she imagining that bit?

'We weren't going to,' mumbled one of the apes.

'Transmat,' Lucretia said. Apart from 'don't kill me', it was the only other word she could remember right now.

The robed ape looked at Katastrophen. From down here on her knees, Lucretia could see right up its flat little nose. 'She wants to use the transmat? But -'

'Nnnnnnh,' screeched Lucretia. And suddenly, she was struggling. She wasn't sure whether there really were furry hands holding her down, or whether she was imagining them, but either way she couldn't move her arms or legs

properly. The more she struggled, the more hands there were, and then the needles started moving in, their hot little tips buzzing away in front of her eyes. She looked to Katastrophien for help, realizing now it was his arm she was clutching. He moved away, his leather sleeve slipping out of her hand. The transmat platform sat in the background, smug as ever. Waiting. Just waiting.

Waiting to kill her.

She saw one of the apes fiddling with the wide end of its needle weapon. Then there was something pressing against the side of her neck.

A hydraulic hiss. Blue in her veins.

They stopped sending Lucretia Caroline Scannon to school when she was eight years old. There wasn't much point going on with a formal education. School, as the Planetary Prospectus of Sarah-361 liked to point out, was a social experience. It was hardly fair on someone as 'socially disadvantaged' as she was.

So young Lucretia was dumped in a room with a V-set, programmed to receive transmissions only on the Henson Memorial Education Channel, no matter how much she fiddled with the knobs. Her parents left her with the interactive animatronic presenters and told her to learn something.

'Transmats,' the presenter said one day. 'We're talking about transmats. Do you know all about transmats, Pollyanna?'

Lucretia shook her head and tried to look interested. The unit was supposed to call her by her own name, but there was a software fault in the V-set that made it think she was called 'Pollyanna'. She didn't know anything about transmats. She knew they were used by people who lived in the Sarah Metropol, but there were none of them this far out in the suburbs.

'Transmats are a fast, easy and fun way to get from one place to another,' the presenter explained, its big wobbly

green nose gyrating wildly. 'Do you want to see how they work?'

'Uh,' said Lucretia.

So the V-set told her. She sat in what could only be described as stunned silence for twenty minutes while the animatroid explained the basic principles of transmat technology. The programme was only five minutes long, but Lucretia insisted on watching it four times over. Just to make sure she hadn't misheard.

The transmat would take you apart, said the V-set. It would break you down into little pieces of dust, then feed the dust into a special computer. The machine would record the exact details of the molecules, transmitting the data to another machine, say, on the other side of the Metropol. There, more dust would be used to build a new version of you.

After the fourth time, there was a long silence in Lucretia's room, while the little REPEAT? icon bounced merrily across the screen.

'But that means you'd die,' Lucretia finally squeaked. It was a pretty profound line, from an eight-year-old.

The machine took this as a cue to repeat the programme, as 'Pollyanna' obviously hadn't understood the information. After the fifth showing, Lucretia was even more convinced that she was right.

'But you die,' she howled. 'It doesn't transport you anywhere at all. It kills you and makes a copy somewhere else.' And she imagined stepping on to a transmat platform, then everything going black as the device promptly murdered you. There'd be a perfect reconstruction of you somewhere else, yes. But that wasn't much of a consolation, when you were dead.

The machine's interactivity engine must have detected this line of thinking, because it sent 'Pollyanna' a programme made by the New Human Orthodoxy. A kindly old vicar told her how the Church had put a lot of thought into this whole transmat question, and where it left intangible things like the soul (a little EXPLAIN? icon popped up when he used the

word 'intangible', but Lucretia already knew what it meant).
The

Church had officially decided that the soul was transferred as well as the body. After all, God would hardly let mortal man copy something like the soul, and besides, many leading hardware companies made a lot of money selling transmat platforms, something they surely wouldn't do if the technology was in any way dangerous.

Lucretia wasn't convinced. All this talk about 'souls' was just plain silly, in her opinion. If you made an exact copy of someone, she thought, then they'd act in exactly the same way as the original, because their brains would be identical, right down to the tiniest little fragment. What did the soul have to do with anything?

She made the mistake of saying this out loud. The V-set logged the statement, and planted it in the government's citizen ID files. Clearly, this child was very disturbed, and couldn't even deal with a little thing like transmat technology. Sterilization, it suggested, might be in order.

That night, when the education period was over, Lucretia tuned into one of the Mindless Entertainment Networks on the family V-set in the living room. She watched one of those grittily realistic Deep Space Dramas that Earth Central liked colonists to watch, and saw the way the cosmic explorers casually used transmats to get from their ship to the surface of the planet they were supposed to be investigating. Lucretia, aged eight, imagined the crew of the Starship *Spongiform* dying over and over again. She imagined heaven, packed with Space Fleet officers. Millions of them. Duplicates of the crew, who'd died and found everlasting peace, twice in every episode.

Later - eight years later, when Lucretia was at a college paid for by her parents, and her physical characteristics seemed more grotesque to her than ever - she met other people who'd queried the explanations given by the Henson Channel. They told Lucretia that you didn't even need to be taken apart for the transmat to work. The machines could easily copy you without killing the original, but they were

programmed to slaughter you first, because the hardware companies didn't want to rock the economy by letting people know you could produce exact copies of valuable objects out of thin air.

But all Lucretia knew was this: if she ever stepped on to a transmat platform, she'd die. Yes, every cell in your body gets replaced, in time. We all die, bit by bit, every day. But Lucretia didn't want to die all at once. The fear had grown in her, year by year, until - insanely - she was more scared of teleporting than of actually dying. The syndrome was called *teleportaphobia*, but nobody called it that because, in all honesty, it was a rubbish name for a psychological disorder. On the newsnets, they called it *molecular vertigo*. It wasn't an accurate description, but it sounded good.

Now her veins were full of blue. There were hairy things hauling her around the guts of a lizard. If they wanted to, they could put her on the platform and press the magic button.

Don't kill me, she thought. Don't kill me.

Not like this.

'We have to escape,' said a voice out of the blue. The voice had a German accent that wasn't entirely believable.

Don't let me die. Not like this.

The night folded itself around Ash. The darkness was tight enough across her skin to stop her seeing anything, but too fragile to hold off whatever the jungle wanted to throw at her. Bloated blood-sucking insects scurried across her face, looking for a way into her body. She closed her lips tight, tried to pull in her nostrils. She wanted to brush the bugs away, but her arms were still tied to the altar stone. Like having an itch she couldn't scratch. Actually, now she thought about it... was it an itch? It could have been an itch. Not insects at all. Hah. Funny, that. No way of telling.

And what about the noises? Rustling sounds. Could have been branches, blowing in the night breeze. On the other

hand, it could have been one of the tigers, still tracking her through the jungle. Or maybe it was something even worse.

Thus, her mind set about this exciting new task: think of five things it could be that are worse than tigers.

(1) The tribesmen, come back to finish the sacrifice. Good one, that.

(2) A monster. Any kind of monster. Monsters are worse than tigers. Tigers are only animals. Monsters are monsters.

(3) !X.

It was hard getting past (3). The underworld was hissing reminders at her, telling her she was alone, helpless, vulnerable. It could take her at any time, and it wanted her to know it.

(4) A voice. The rustling could have been the wilderness itself, reminding her this was all part of !X's demonstration. This is your moment of horror, Ash Juliandis. Fos!ca had hers, but you're tougher. You're part of a younger, more spiteful culture, even if you did try to break the conditioning. It took longer for you to get here, but here you are at last, on the edge. Finally realizing exactly how little stands between you and the darkness.

(5) Nothing. That's how much stands between you and the darkness, Ash. That's what the rustling is. The sound of nothing at all.

Help me. Please. Professor. !X. Anybody.

Don't let me die. Not like this.

Not like this.

'WHERE THE WILD THINGS AREN'T!'

Mr Misnomer had developed an interesting method of navigating the darkened caves. Every six paces or so, he'd squeeze the trigger of the stasis gun, lighting up the area with a WHUFF and a blaze of blue luminescent gas. Bernice had also developed an interesting method of navigating the caverns. It was called 'following Mr Misnomer wherever he goes'.

As they made their way along the tunnel, she tried explaining about the Tribe of Lilith again, insisting that their only chance of getting to the bottom of the underworld (whichever way that might be) was to communicate with the yeti. Mr M remained sceptical.

'Trust me on this,' he said. 'You don't try talking to someone who wants to see you stuffed and mounted.'

WHUFF. The cavern was narrowing ahead of them, until it became barely wide enough for Mr Misnomer to squeeze through. Bernice steered herself around a series of stalagmites that served no purpose other than to look menacing.

'Hadn't you noticed?' she said. 'They haven't killed anybody, yet. They froze all the soldiers at the camp. You said it yourself, their weapons probably have "kill" settings. But they're not using them. Why?'

Bernice could make out a shrug in the fading blue light. 'All right, so they've got phasers on freeze. Big deal. Anyway, how the hell could we communicate? You think a bunch of yetis are likely to speak English?'

'Yeti. Plural of yeti is yeti.' WHUFF. They were at the narrowest point of the tunnel, the rock walls on either side of them riddled with gaping cracks. 'Look, I think there's a

pretty good chance they *do* speak English. So far, this whole environment has been like something out of a pulp adventure, or a Saturday morning serial. Have you ever read any... sorry. Forget I asked. The point is, whenever the heroes of the old pulps meet a lost caveman tribe, the lost caveman tribe always speaks English. They never explain how that works, but it does. And if this place is as artificial as I think it is, then -'

WHUFF. 'Artificial?' queried Mr Misnomer. 'You said that before. How come you're so certain?'

'Little hints. These stalagmites, for example. Stalagmites are formed by water dripping from a cave roof, but these caves are totally dry. There's no sign of water erosion at all. The stalagmites are just for show.'

Mr Misnomer stopped moving. Bernice knew he'd stopped moving because she walked into him. 'Good point,' he said. 'Hate to say it, but that's a good point.'

'Come to think of it, do you notice anything else odd about this cave ? It's quiet.'

'Too quiet?'

'Don't take the mirth. Katastrophen's men surveyed the caves when we set up camp. They said there were -'

WHUFF.

Misnomer's stasis gun illuminated one of the tunnel walls, where a particularly wide crack had formed in the rock. The gas had started crystallizing inside the fissure, much to the annoyance of the things that had been nesting there. A couple of them were frozen solid, but the rest flapped clear of the gas, clawing their way out of the crack and hurling themselves at Mr Misnomer.

In a second, the air was filled with a manic high-pitched squeaking that probably sounded as sweet as birdsong if you could hear ultra-high frequencies and make out the patterns. In the blue afterglow, Bernice saw a fat black shadow fly into Mr Misnomer's face. He raised his fist to slap it away, while his other hand tightened around the gun, spraying more of the stasis gas on to the floor of the cavern.

The bats had been completely silent, that was the scary thing. When they'd been disturbed, they'd all come to life at once, as if they were all part of one self-aware life form. The light faded. There was a metallic crunch, the sound of Misnomer dropping the weapon. Bernice took a step back...

...and something bit her. Hard. On the arm. She cried out, tried to rub the wound with her other hand, only to find something warm and furry under her fingertips. One of the bats had gnawed its way through her skin, and it was clinging on, biting down so hard she could hardly feel the pain any more. Bernice swung her arm wildly, bashing the creature against one of the stalagmites. She pretended she'd planned it that way.

Something reeled into her, knocked her back along the passage, though she wasn't sure whether it was Mr Misnomer beating his retreat or a cluster of the bats moving in on her. She stumbled backward, only to feel a set of incisors nip into her leg. She howled again. Fell over. The impact as she hit the floor would have hurt, if the parts of her brain that dealt with pain responses hadn't already been busy with the thing chewing on her thigh.

Bernice slapped at the bat, and, amazingly, it let go. She thought of getting to her feet, but before she could move it was over her chest, wings beating the stale air above her face. Instinctively, she lifted a hand to cover her eyes. Several pinpricks, probably the thing's claws, dug into her fingers.

Suddenly, she was looking into the creature's eyes.

Strictly speaking, that shouldn't have been possible. It was too dark to see the bat's face, or even tell exactly where its head was. But she knew its eyes were there, goggling at her, monitoring her.

And there was something else. On the other side of the eyes. Not inside its head, as such, but more distant. A presence, filtering itself through the bat's nervous system. She tried to figure out what kind of sense was telling her this, though it didn't seem to be any of the five she was familiar with.

'I can see you,' Bernice gurgled. 'I can see you.'

The bat opened its jaws to screech at her, letting a thin stream of foul-smelling saliva dribble down on to her cheek. Then it went for the throat.

In the Chamber of Muttering, the Eldest were concentrating again, practically shaking with the effort. Seeing through the eyes of one of the Tribe was easy, and even 'tuning in' to a Gug was a simple process, if unpleasant. But the bats were harder. Their senses were limited, and to get a good idea of what was going on you had to take in the sensory data of a whole flock. It was like putting together a jigsaw when all the pieces kept moving.

It was a good thing, really, that the Eldest had force-bred the bats to develop proper night vision. If they'd had to deal with the animals' sonar senses, all thirteen of them would probably have gone stark staring mad.

'I can see you,' the woman exclaimed, looking straight into the minds of the thirteen. 'I can see you.'

Around the Chamber, surprised old eyes creaked open. Gnarled bodies suddenly relaxed, and the shift of tension was almost enough to send their retainers toppling to the ground.

'What did she say?' demanded the Angriest of the Eldest, after the obligatory stunned silence.

'She can see us,' somebody squealed. 'You heard her.'

'But that means...' someone else ventured.

'It means nothing!' snapped the Angriest. 'The bats have them helpless. Send our people in, and end it now.'

The Eldest of the Eldest stirred uneasily. 'The conclusion is clear. The human woman must be part of the process, also.'

'Hog wash!'

'Really?' The Eldest turned her head towards the Angriest. The Eldest of the Eldest only ever turned her head in times of dire emergency, when she wanted to intimidate someone. Her head was so heavy, it was folly to move it any more often. 'So what would you have us do? Kill them, and incur the wrath of MEPHISTO if they're important to the process?'

The Angriest grumbled under his breath, and looked away.

This changes our plans,' the Eldest went on. 'We can't kill them, or risk leaving them frozen. We have only one course open to us. We give them up to the judgement of MEPHISTO.'

There were concerned mutterings from around the Chamber. 'You mean... take them to the sun?' the Youngest enquired.

The Eldest of the Eldest almost nodded, but thought better of it at the last minute. 'An extreme measure, but justified. After all, the emissary... I'm sorry, you're right, it is a horrible word... the emissary is already inside the cathedral. There's no reason why the humans shouldn't join him.'

'All the humans?'

'All that remain. There are the two in the cavern. Give our people on the mountain orders to take them, alive and conscious, if possible. There are two on board one of the dirigibles, being taken to the pool for assimilation. And... isn't there another?'

One of the other Eldest squeezed her eyes tight shut. 'Yes. At the bottom of the gravity cone.'

'Good. We'll pick her up ourselves.' That caused another concerned mutter, and the Eldest of the Eldest allowed a smile to cross her hairy old face. 'If the humans are to enter the presence of MEPHISTO, we can hardly let them go alone. It's time to leave the Chamber. I think. Order the oldest dirigible. We're going to have a grand day out.'

Lucretia Scannon sat against the sloping wall of the dirigible's belly, huddled up in a foetal ball. Katastrophen watched her with what he very nearly identified as concern. He had no idea what had come over the girl. One minute she'd been dealing with the situation admirably; indeed, Katastrophen had begun to think she was nowhere near as weak and helpless as she liked to make out. But then she'd suddenly broken down, screaming and clawing at the creatures around her, babbling something about the transmat.

The transmat. Katastrophen turned his head, though not enough to make the movement clear to the apes milling

around him. He eyed the metal plate, set into the floor mere metres away. If he stayed on this dirigible, the apes might lead him to their superiors, and thus to the Pool of Life. That seemed like a good idea, except...

...except he didn't know how pleased their superiors would be to see him. They were the supermen of legend, after all, the giants who had walked the Earth before mankind had dragged itself out of the primeval ocean. When he'd thought this expedition through in his head, Katastrophen had imagined himself greeting the Ancient Ones with open arms, a happy reunion for the oldest race and their human offspring. But down here, in the dirt and darkness of the Inner World, he couldn't be so certain. The giants were greater, better creatures than himself. What if they saw him in the same way he saw the apes? What if they treated him as if he were sub... subhu... s...

As if he were inferior?

Oh. The thought was terrible. Terrible. It was as if, all of a sudden, he was aware of something very, very wrong with the world, something he'd never noticed before. Perhaps escape was a better option, then. Katastrophen looked down at the huddled form of Lucretia Scannon. She wasn't actually sucking her thumb, but she was coming close to it.

'Transmat,' she mumbled. 'Transmat.'

Yes. Her breakdown must have been caused by her proximity to the repulsive ape beings, the idiot slaves of the Tribe of Lilith. Katastrophen couldn't blame her for that. He felt the anger inflating inside him, the same fury that had propelled him away from Darvilleva-Q and towards Stella Stora with thoughts of genetic purity and a New Human Crusade in his head. Escape would prove him better than these beasts. Why, even in her delirium. Miss Scannon knew the best course.

Nearby, the ape that wore monk's robes had closed its eyes, and its lips were moving wordlessly. The three armed animals watched the spectacle. They weren't paying much attention to the *kommander*. Perhaps if he moved fast enough...

The robed ape opened its eyes. 'We have our orders,' it said. 'The prisoners are not to be taken to the pool. They are to be taken to the cathedral.'

The apes looked positively shocked. Around the dirigible, other creatures - the ones who'd been lounging around like chimpanzees in an apehouse, scratching and picking at each other - started to take notice.

'The cathedral?' queried one of the armed beings. 'You mean... the sun?'

'The Tribe of Lilith,' rasped Katastrophen.

The words had just slipped out. It had been a mistake; a dozen simian eyes were suddenly on him. But the intentions of the apes had been so clear. He and Miss Scannon were to be taken to the centre of the world, without doubt to meet the Tribe, at last.

'Yes?' said the robed ape.

'The Tribe of Lilith,' Katastrophen repeated. 'They wish to inspect us. Personally.'

The apes started frowning, looking at each other with wide, stupid eyes. 'I don't understand,' said the monk. 'We are the Tribe of Lilith.'

No. No. Not possible. The ape was lying. It was trying to make him think that they, the gorilla savages, were the ancient supermen. So Katastrophen would think of himself as a lower form of life. They were trying to hurt him. Humiliate him. Any second now, any second, they'd start laughing, making jokes about having to amputate his leg, just like Darvilleva-Q -

He screamed. He liked to think it was a battle cry, but he wasn't sure if it sounded that way. His fist shot out towards the monk-ape's face. The beast tried to duck, but Katastrophen was too fast, and his knuckles broke its jaw. Instantly, the three armed apes were alert, aiming their weapons at him.

'Transmat,' mumbled a female voice by Katastrophen's side.

The sound probably saved Katastrophen's neck. The apes had forgotten about Miss Scannon, probably because they'd

judged her to be no threat to them. Now, in the heat of conflict, her interruption had made them hesitate, as if expecting an attack from another direction.

The *kommander* seized the advantage. He lunged forward, ignoring the agony in his leg, and grabbed the end of the nearest weapon. The animal holding it pressed the trigger, but Katastrophen pushed the nozzle aside, a wave of cold brushing against the skin of his cheek. He pulled back his head, cracked it against the ape's face. At the same time, he tugged at the weapon. The ape fell back, more surprised than hurt by the headbutt, letting go of the needle.

Katastrophen swung the stasis gun around to cover the apes, fumbling for the triggering mechanism at the wide end. The others had finally got to grips with the situation, and were pointing their own weapons at him. But they had to aim. They were trying to hit a single target, and not damage any of the instruments set into the walls of the dirigible. Katastrophen had only to press the trigger and sweep the area. This split-second advantage was enough for him to fill the air with gas. The temperature dropped. The beasts started grunting in alarm, like gorillas in the mist.

The chamber was full of blue. There were sounds of movement in the fog, those apes who'd been out of range, stumbling around in search of their own guns. Katastrophen let the weapon drop, then bolted for the transmat platform. He wasn't limping any more. The pain no longer seemed important.

It was only when he reached the transmat plate that he noticed the thing he was clutching in his right hand. It was somebody else's wrist. Without even acknowledging it, he'd grabbed Miss Scannon as he'd made for the platform, dragging her across the rubbery floor behind him. Yes, that was why he'd dropped the weapon - tactically speaking, not a good move.

Looking down, Katastrophen could tell the girl was utterly terrified. Her eyes were focused on the metal plate in front of her eyes. Katastrophen interpreted this as an admirable

resolution of purpose. The transmat was the only thing that mattered to her. She, too, had a desperate need of escape.

And what about himself? He'd saved her without even thinking about it. Didn't that show a kind of honour? Miss Scannon - Lucretia - had saved him on the mountain slope, admittedly after a little emotional manipulation. Now he had saved her in return. And he had done it almost subconsciously.

'Nnnnnnnnngh,' grunted Lucretia. She started shaking as Katastrophen hauled her on to the transmat platform.

'Don't worry,' he told her. 'We're going to leave this place. You're quite safe.'

Lucretia tried to cough up a response, but failed.

The control box was attached to the wall next to the metal plate. Katastrophen didn't have the slightest idea how to operate the transmat. He reached out and bashed the buttons with his list, hoping it would engage the mechanism. Anywhere was better than here, surely?

A plume of gas burst forth out of the haze, very nearly paralysing Katastrophen's outstretched hand. Then there was a near-subsonic hum from beneath his feet, the sound of the transmat engine warming up. Katastrophen put his hand down by his side, inside the transmission field. In the last second before the transmat engaged, he glanced at Lucretia, curled up on the metal plate at his feet. In that instant, she seemed to become aware of something terrible, because her eyes grew as wide as saucers and her muscles began to convulse manically.

'Don't let them use the machine,' Katastrophen heard one of the apes cry out. 'We've been ordered not to -'

The transmat engaged. Kommander Ernst Katastrophen and Lucretia Scannon were reduced to their smallest possible component parts; the information was fed into the transmat mechanism and they were beamed across the interior of Tyler's Folly.

The collection of organic materials that referred to itself as Lucretia Scannon died. Simply died. Her body was reduced to

dust, and scattered evenly throughout the vaporous atmosphere of the dirigible. None of the apes who breathed in her mortal remains were even aware this had happened.

On the bright side, an exact duplicate of her was being hastily assembled elsewhere.

Unfamiliar chemicals started rubbing themselves together inside the biosystem of Ash Juliandis. The odd thing was, she knew it was happening.

'MEPHISTO,' she murmured, speaking to no one in particular. 'I know you're there. I can feel you.'

She looked up towards the sun, saw nothing but the dark. It didn't matter. MEPHISTO was there, up at the centre of the world, listening to her.

'I know what you are,' she said, 'I know how you got there and what you're for. You did this to me, didn't you? Wouldn't be surprised if it was you who put all this new stuff inside me. Can you hear me?'

The dead sun didn't reply. The breeze continued to push words through the branches of the jungle.

'Say what you want,' Ash said. 'Go on. Do your worst. I don't care any more, you know that? Make all the threats you like. It doesn't make any difference. Nothing makes a difference. Even if I had a last-minute rescue from Mr Misnomer or somebody. It wouldn't change things. I'd know. I'd still know something was wrong somewhere. I'm part of it, aren't I?'

There was a pause; Ash wondered if the jungle was actually thinking up a reply. Then there were shapes in the darkness. She couldn't see them, but she knew they were there, even before the hot, hairy hands started brushing across her body and loosening the ropes.

'The Eldest are waiting for you,' a voice that clearly wasn't human whispered into her ear. 'Come with us. Now.'

'THE PRIMORDIAL SOUP DRAGON!'

At some point, Bernice's pain responses decided to shut her consciousness down and hope for the best.

Once her consciousness was no longer attached to her body, as such, she felt much more comfortable with the idea of being nibbled out of existence by the bats. Eventually, she found herself being dragged along the inevitable white tunnel. Her logical side told her this was a common experience, for people undergoing sensory deprivation. Her instinctive side told her she was bloody well dying and going to heaven, and she'd deck any part of her psyche that said different.

Heaven was a blazing vacuum full of people dressed in white suits. Surprisingly, they were all Bernice Summerfields, of various ages and with varying haircuts.

'We're the welcoming committee,' the nearest Bernice told her, tartly.

'This is the afterlife?' Bernice looked around, trying to find an unfamiliar face in the crowd. 'Sony, is there actually any particular reason why heaven is full of me? I mean, if this is paradise, I'm flattered.'

'We're your previous lives,' the closest Bernice explained. .

'All of the dead Bernices,' another continued.

'All those who kicked the champagne bucket on transmat platforms,' a third, unusually blonde, Bernice concluded.

The real Bernice - if there was such an animal - nodded. 'A-hah. I think I get the idea. The extreme phobic's view. Every transmission creates a new soul, and kills the last one. Interesting idea, but I can't say I've ever believed it. And I don't have molecular vertigo.'

'You don't have to. The neurosis is infectious.'

‘Pardon?’

‘It’s become part of the environment. Don’t you think it’s odd, the way all the wildlife in this place wants to drain your blood? Almost as if the ecosystem’s assimilating data.’

Bernice thought about that. ‘Is this the voice of my subconscious speaking, at all?’

‘Yes,’ chorused the other Bernices, testily.

A short-haired Bernice in a pink all-over body stocking stepped forward out of the corniche of Summerfields. ‘You could maybe consider going back now,’ she said. ‘Not that we want to pressure you or anything, but if you stay here, you’ll be the last. If you see what we mean.’

‘Gotcha.’

So Bernice willed herself back to Earth, and soon found herself floating, looking at the tops of the other Bernices’ heads, trying to ignore the dandruff of a hundred lifetimes. When she opened her eyes, the pain came back, welling up in little puddles all over her body. Her feet still weren’t touching the ground, and her shoulders were sore. She squinted into the darkness around her.

Wind battered her face. Finally, it clicked.

She was in the air, suspended hundreds of metres above the ground. She could see the lights of a settlement, far below, set into the side of a mountain. Bernice risked looking up, to see a pad of grey fur above her head.

It was a yeti. An airborne yeti. Patagia stretched between its limbs, allowing it to glide on the air currents. Her shoulders ached because its paws were digging into them with long, unmanicured nails. In the half-light up ahead, Bernice could make out another gliding mammal, a second human form dangling in its arms. Mr Misnomer, no doubt.

‘Hello?’ Bernice said. ‘Hello up there? Can you speak English? Come to think of it, can you speak?’

The yeti didn’t respond. Bernice wondered if it was ignoring her, or if her words had simply been carried away on the wind.

Then she saw the dirigible.

The individual that remembered being Lucretia Caroline Scannon, but hadn't even existed until a few seconds ago, stumbled off the transmat platform and hiccuped. Absurdly, the first thought she had was to wonder if this was a dignified way to come into the world.

Then the more sensible parts of her brain caught up with events, and she felt like screaming.

She was dead. Her body was in fragments, kilometres away, many hundreds of kilometres away. Scattered in billions and billions of tiny pieces -

But wait. She remembered it all, didn't she? The transmat scanning her body, the slight cellular vibration seconds before she'd been taken apart. She remembered watching the vidcast on the Henson Channel at the age of eight. She remembered her first kiss, the feeling of 'so what?' after it was over, and the incomprehensible sense of betrayal when the boy turned out to be doing it for a bet. She remembered arriving on Dellah. Going shopping with Ash. She remembered everything Lucretia Scannon should have remembered. She felt the shock Lucretia Scannon would have felt, on realizing she was an ex-student.

Oh, but a perfect copy would have perfect memories, wouldn't it? Like a robot, a machine that thought it was human, with human memories all part and parcel of the boot-up package. A collection of atoms suffering the delusion that it was a girl.

A hand planted itself on her shoulder. Lucretia didn't even flinch. The walking dead didn't know how to jump. 'Miss Scannon?' said Kommander Katastrophen.

Lucretia spun around and punched him in the face. She kept punching. Katastrophen's leg collapsed under him, and he fell to the floor in a heap of old bones and dusty leathers. After a while, Lucretia managed to stop kicking him.

As she pulled herself together - ha ha, very funny, transmat gallows humour - she noticed her surroundings for the first time. She was in a cavern, but not like the ones the Gugs lived in. The walls were too smooth, parts of the black rock shining like darkened glass. She stood at the end of a

dead-end passage, which opened out into a wider area a few metres away. Lanterns, those Lucretia had come to associate with the ape creatures, were set into alcoves in the walls, smearing shiny patches of red across the more reflective surfaces.

The transmat terminal sat at the end of the passage, another circular metal plate bolted to the floor. Lucretia imagined it leering at her. Like a predator that had just eaten an old friend. Which, in a sense, was exactly what it was.

Katastrophen boggled up at her, a look of surprise (not concern, surely?) on his old frog's face. His glasses lay on the floor beside him, a crack across the left lens. Little electrical sparks were fizzing across the broken glass, oddly. Without the spectacles, his eyes were tiny blue buttons.

'You're delusional,' he said, quite calmly.

Lucretia realized she'd been holding her breath ever since she'd been on the

Lucretia realized she'd been holding her breath ever since her original self had been on the dirigible. She breathed for the first time in her existence. Then she wrapped her arms around herself and lowered her head.

'Leave me alone,' she said. 'I'm in mourning.'

She didn't look up, but she heard the *kommander* pull himself to his feet. Every move he made echoed around the cavern. He was picking up his glasses now, bending them back into shape. After a while, he hobbled off down the passage.

'I think I begin to understand,' he said as he walked away, the echo of his voice sliding and slurping around the walls of the cave. 'You suffer from a phobia, yes? What they call molecular vertigo?'

Lucretia didn't even bother to shrug.

'I assure you, Miss Scannon, there's no cause for alarm. People have been using transmat technology since the twenty-first century. I hardly think it would be such a popular method of transportation if...'

He trailed off. There was a long silence.

'*Mein Gott*,' he hissed.

Lucretia looked up. Katastrophen was standing at the open end of the passage. His body was frozen rigid. His weight was resting on his bad leg, but he didn't seem to care.

Lucretia slouched down the passage after him. After all, she had nothing better to do. Might as well pretend to be the real Lucretia Scannon. she thought, do the things the real Lucretia Scannon would have done.

At any other time in her life, the cavern at the end of the passage would have taken her breath away. It wasn't the size of the place; it was large, yes, a hundred metres from side to side, but so what? It wasn't the design, either; the area was circular, carved in the same smooth rock as the passage, the domed ceiling held up by curving silver girders.

No, the important tiling was the pool. It pretty much covered the floor, apart from a narrow walkway running around the wall. It was impossible to say how deep the pool was, as the liquid in it was thick and mucus-like, a murky pink in colour. It looked like it had been coughed out of the guts of a dinosaur, something organic and quite possibly diseased. Miniature whirlpools opened and closed their little mouths as Lucretia watched, making sicky burping noises at her.

She couldn't quite work out which of her senses was being overwhelmed here. The pool had a *presence*. It was like standing too close to someone on a skidbus, being inside somebody else's personal space...

Meanwhile, Katastrophen had stopped breathing.

The Pool of Life,' he croaked, expelling the last of the air from his lungs and nearly forgetting how to inhale again.

The dirigible hovered above the clearing. Above the whole of the clearing. It was impressive, Ash had to give it that. The vessel was vast, its skin covered by layer upon layer of yeti. Many of them had died while stitched to the surface, giving the dirigible a super-thick dermis of calcified flesh. Mummified limbs dangled uselessly from its underside, dead hands reaching out for a ground they hadn't touched in centuries.

She climbed the skin ladder, the yeti behind her occasionally jabbing her in the spine with their stasis guns. She didn't bother arguing with them.

The area in the belly of the dirigible was large enough to be divided into compartments, separated by walls of sculpted biomass. The yeti led Ash directly to a chamber at the front end of the vessel, set right behind the lizard's skull. In the skull cavity itself, yeti pilots would be pushing heated control rods into the dirigible's brain, steering it away from the clearing. Ash had no actual knowledge of this. She merely understood the logic of it all, the way this ecosystem worked.

She was part of the process. Nothing surprised her now.

The prime dystopian fear, according to Oobert Valdeburg: mind control. Alien invaders could take over your brain; future fascist governments could manipulate your feelings. Or, as Valdeburg had put it, 'possession is nine-tenths of science fiction'. But this wasn't your average neural takeover. God no. MEPHISTO wasn't that straightforward.

The chamber was the largest section of the dirigible. It was roughly circular, the floor maybe thirty metres from side to side, the ceiling peppered with red lanterns. The light wasn't quite bright enough to make Ash's eyes feel comfortable, and there were no furnishings. Ash's new-found instincts told her the room was a rough copy of the Chamber of Muttering, down in the yeti settlement. Designed to look spartan and austere.

The thirteen Eldest were yeti, but yeti of a particularly ancient breed, their fur grown so long and dirty that their skinny bodies seemed to be nothing more than knots of matted hair. Their craniums were enormous, bigger than should have been possible for a roughly humanoid life form. The smallest of the skulls on offer here was a good metre in diameter, a bloated bubble of bone resting on a dangerously scrawny neck. Wispy grey hairs were stretched across the great bald patches between the yeti's temples. Comb-overs from hell.

The heads of the Eldest were so large, in fact, that they simply couldn't support them alone. Each of the thirteen was

attended by a clutch of young yeti retainers, whose purpose was to hold up the drooping skulls. The retainers were taking practically all their masters' weight, the toes of the Eldest barely brushing the floor.

Eldest and retainers together, around sixty-five pairs of eyes turned to face Ash as the guards ushered her into the chamber. She regarded them without great concern.

'Welcome, human,' one of the Eldest said.

'Where's Lucretia?' Ash asked, without hesitation.

A couple of the Eldest shuffled uncomfortably.

'We ask the questions,' one particularly angry individual snarled.

Another of the Eldest waved him aside. 'Please. We should show some degree of respect.' This member of the assembly, Ash noted, was older even than the others. There were so many wrinkles around her eyes, the lines looked like the only things holding her face together. 'You're concerned about one of your friends?' the Eldest of the Eldest asked.

'All of them,' said Ash. 'We'll start with Lucretia. She's the one with the yellowish fur on top of her head.'

'I know the one. She was on board one of the other dirigibles. She escaped.'

'Really? I'm impressed.'

'We'll have her back soon, don't worry. We've already dispatched soldiers to all the transmat terminals in the vicinity.'

'You don't seem very alarmed,' one of the other Eldest said. Somehow, he sounded younger than the others. 'You're only the second human we've ever met. We thought you'd be scared.'

Ash shrugged. 'Bit late for that now,' she said.

A yeti was applying fat leeches to Bernice's skin in the belly of an inflatable dinosaur. If there was one image she'd take to her grave, this was probably it. She felt the leeches licking at the wounds the bats had made, slurping up the blood and pus, getting noticeably fatter as they fed. The yeti watched approvingly. Bernice tried to think of a good opening line.

‘So,’ she said, lamely. ‘So. So. Do you come here often?’

The yeti gave her the kind of look that people usually reserve for those who run over their domestic pets.

‘They don’t want to talk to us,’ Mr Misnomer murmured. The old man was standing up against a wall, a couple of the yeti guards waving their stasis guns in his face. He didn’t seem to have been wounded at all. Either the bats hadn’t liked his taste, or his skin was biteproof. The big show-off.

‘We have to try and communicate,’ Bernice told him. ‘Communication is the only... errr.’ That last utterance was a result of seeing one of the leeches suddenly explode, spurting blood and grey ooze all over her arm. The wound it had perched on had completely healed over.

Across her body, the leeches started popping. Mere seconds later, Bernice was fit, well and covered in goop.

‘That’s disgusting,’ she announced. ‘I mean, effective, but disgusting.’

Another of the yeti lurched over to them. This one was dressed in something like a priest’s robe, in a garish orange that was not in any way fetching. ‘The Eldest are ready for them, if you’re finished.’ the yeti told the medic.

The medic nodded, and started packing his surviving leeches into what looked chillingly like an old Gladstone bag. The other guards began prodding the two prisoners with their weapons again, and Bernice was led through the heaving organic chambers of the dirigible’s belly, Mr Misnomer behind her.

‘Looks like this is it,’ she said.

‘Shh,’ Misnomer said. ‘Voices. Up ahead. Listen.’

They were being ushered towards a hatch set into a bulkhead of bone. Bernice listened. Over the assorted gruntings of the guards, she could hear conversation on the other side.

‘...to MEPHISTO,’ said an ancient female voice. Even the syllables had wrinkles.

‘And then what?’ The second voice was also female, but younger. It didn’t take Bernice long to recognize it.

‘There is some dispute among us,’ the first voice replied. ‘We’re not sure whether you’re part of MEPHISTO’s plan, or opposed to it. In effect, we’re putting the matter beyond our judgment. MEPHISTO will know MEPHISTO’s own. You’ll either be guests, or sacrifices.’

The yeti retinue opened the hatch with great ceremony and reverence. Bernice and Mr Misnomer were nudged inside, the guards bowing their heads slightly as they entered the chamber.

It wasn’t hard to see why. Bernice had never seen creatures like these before, but their status as leaders was obvious. Each of the beings was attended by a small cluster of yeti, each retainer dressed in an identical orange robe.

‘Hello, Professor,’ said Ash.

Bernice gurned back at her. ‘What’s a nice girl like you doing in a saurian like this?’ she said.

‘Silence!’ roared one of the ancient yeti. Bernice could see the saliva dripping from his wrinkled lips.

‘What my colleague means is, good evening,’ another of the old ones said. ‘We, as you must have gathered, are the Eldest of the Tribe. And I am the Eldest of the Eldest. You may call me Mother Lilith.’

‘How do you know?’ asked Lucretia Scannon.

Katastrophen threw his arms wide, as if to embrace the full majesty of the chamber. ‘Can you not tell? Can you not feel it? *Gott in Himmel*. That sense... I feel I’ve been here before, but... oh. The familiarity.’

Lucretia gave him a funny look. Katastrophen clenched his teeth. He was putting a lot of effort into being overjoyed, he really was, but he could feel it building up inside him again, the rage, the frustration. He pretended it was all Lucretia’s fault, told himself it had nothing to do with the fact that, after spending a decade of his existence searching for the Pool of Life, he now had no idea what to do with it.

‘Providence,’ he ranted. ‘When I pressed the control unit on the transmat, I expected it to take us to a random location. I see, now, that fate must have guided my hand.’

He finally shifted his weight off his bad leg. The pain had been terrible, but it hadn't seemed important. He limped towards the edge of the Pool, and knelt by its side, the pink liquid burbling at him as he approached. Katastrophen imagined it had sensed him, and was reacting to his presence. It sounded slightly irritated, though. Or was he imagining it?

The Pool kept bubbling, the ripples spreading, becoming waves closer to the centre of the chamber. Katastrophen stood, took a nervous step backward. The surface of the Pool was breaking open, something slippery rising from the liquid. Wet, hairless, like a newborn baby, but covered in subtle wrinkles, the pink substance solidifying in the shape of a head. Katastrophen was reminded of a degenerate modern art exhibit he'd once seen, where an artist had sculpted a life-size model of a cow out of his own blood, the fluid kept in place by a series of suspensor fields.

The head rose from the Pool, and hovered above the surface on the end of a single spinelike tendril. The tendril extended, sprouting sharp, jagged offshoots. Then it split down the middle. Katastrophen recognized the form as a simple humanoid outline, two arms, two legs, and a head.

A new thought hatched itself inside the *kommander's* mind. Was he activating the Pool of Life by being so close to it? Was his very presence engendering the new superman? Was he kick-starting the next phase in mankind's evolution?

Or what ?

The skeleton started to drip, long pink teardrops leaking from its arms and crystallizing into cords of semisolid matter. The cords stretched, until they were long enough to wrap themselves around the skeleton. A nervous system, Katastrophen guessed. More matter ran up the legs of the shape, building up layers of flesh from the bottom to the top. Bit by bit, surplus biomass would drop away from the body, revealing the small details. The face sprouted gelatinous hair. Male genitalia dropped shamelessly from the lower abdomen.

Finally, the shape was complete. And it was human. It wasn't as well muscled as Katastrophen might have liked,

but then, perhaps the new superman was stronger mentally than physically. In fact, the body seemed a little on the skinny side, more the kind of physique you'd expect to find in a badly nourished media-decadent culture. If it hadn't been an unnatural pink in colour, Katastrophen would have expected the skin to be horribly pale. The figure's face, while not unattractive, was hardly a model of Aryan beauty. It was in its thirties, showing signs of cosmetic surgery, with a nose that was slightly too hooked and a brow that was slightly too large. The hair was swept back across an angular skull, the individual fibres melding together, as if the pink matter hadn't quite got the hang of it yet.

The apparition extended his hand, as if to shake Katastrophen's. Even though the shape was half a dozen metres away across the pool, Katastrophen felt himself draw back again. Liquid flesh ran from the pink arm, melting away to reveal the bone and tissue underneath. More gunge hurriedly trickled up the spine and across the shoulders to replace it.

Katastrophen suddenly remembered where he'd seen the figure before.

'Good evening,' the man said. 'You're human, yes?'

Katastrophen nodded. The man smiled. 'I should be pleased to see you. But it's a little late for a rescue. Hah. Yes. As you can see, it doesn't look like I'll be going anywhere in the near

'Rescue?' queried Lucretia. Her voice was flat and toneless, but at least she was speaking again.

The man lowered his hand. 'That is why you're here? To rescue me? No? The company had sent you, I thought.'

'What company?'

'The vidcast company. Ah. I think we're at cross purposes, perhaps. I should start from the beginning. My name is F. Nils Kryptosa, Meister of Natural Sciences at New Heidelberg University, and this is the fabulous new world I've discovered. What do you think of it so far?'

Fos!ca forced herself to stop. Above her, the gravity cone reached its pinnacle, ending at a hole in the surface of the darkened sun. There was no light beyond the hole, even when she looked at it through her secondary lens. Two of the shapes hovering around it were unfamiliar, squashy humanoid forms with limbs that shifted in and out of position from second to second. The third was pale-skinned, but just as protean.

At the tip of the cone, matter was losing its coherency, the strained gravity turning solids into not-so-solids. She was looking at a melted-down version of !X, a version that retained his features without retaining his normal shape. He was hovering on the lip of the hole, preparing to vanish into the interior of the sun.

‘!X,’ Fos!ca shouted. ‘!X. Please. Wait.’

He turned his head, as best he could. A blaze of shapeless white light punctured Fos!ca’s lens.

‘MEPHISTO is waiting.’ he told her.

‘MEPHISTO? Who’s MEPHISTO?’

But !X ignored her, and turned away, his arms and legs seeping into the hole. Fos!ca pushed herself towards him. ‘!X, please, talk to me. What is it? What’s inside the sun?’

!X fed the rest of his body into the darkness. His last words sounded like they’d been liquidized and poured straight into Fos!ca’s ears.

‘Nothing,’ he said. ‘Nothing at all.’ And then he was gone.

'UNHOLY CATHEDRAL!'

'I heard what you said,' Bernice told Mother Lilith. 'We're either guests or sacrifices. Who is MEPHISTO, exactly?'

Twelve of the thirteen Eldest looked slightly shocked, as if it were bad protocol for a hairless simian such as herself to mention the M-word. But Mother Lilith merely closed her eyes. 'God,' she said.

Bernice heard a sharp intake of breath from nearby. 'The Rodenberry-Harrison model,' Ash muttered, under her breath.

Bernice ignored her. 'Any god in particular, or just God in general? In my line of work, you come across a lot of tinpot minor deities.'

Mother Lilith squinted at her. 'For someone so well-travelled, you're curiously disrespectful of the customs of others.'

'That's because I don't think you believe MEPHISTO is really God. I think that's what you tell the rest of the Tribe. I think you know better. It's true, isn't it? You're the ones who know what's really going on around here.'

A smile cracked across Mother Lilith's face. 'Pardon me, but we still don't know whether or not you oppose MEPHISTO's will. We have to be... taciturn.'

'What do you know about the People?' Bernice asked. She rattled out the question, hoping it'd have a big impact on her audience. She expected looks of shock. She didn't get them.

'Er, which people, exactly?' the youngest of the yeti asked.

'The People. With a capital "P".' Bernice realized she was floundering. 'They live in a world a lot like this one, but a long way away. Galaxies away, in fact, although I'm not sure if the word "galaxies" will mean anything to you.'

A couple of the Eldest started murmuring, but no straight answers were forthcoming. 'The shape of your world isn't the only thing you've got in common with the People,' Bernice went on. 'A lot of the things in the worldsphere - that's where the People live seem to be mimicked here. The People have intelligent warships, programmed with millennia of combat experience. You, on the other hand, have blow-up dinosaurs with yeti wired into their brains. Their world is run by a great big artificial intelligence called God, yours is run by a would-be god called MEPHISTO. Your technology's almost as remarkable as theirs, but more visceral. On the worldsphere, everything's smooth and sleek and works perfectly. Here, everything's bloody and brutal. On the other hand, some bits of the Inner World just don't make sense. You call yourself the Tribe of Lilith, but I don't understand the significance of that at all.'

Mother Lilith sighed deeply, it's part of our culture. You know the story of the Garden of Eden?'

'Yes. But I'm surprised *you* do. You speak English, and you know about Earth culture, too.'

'You may not know the full story. We understand that humans only know a butchered version of the history. You know Eden was where God created the first intelligent beings, yet you forget the name of the first woman.'

'Thought it was Eve or something,' grunted Mr Misnomer. It was the first thing he'd said in ages. The yeti guarding him nudged him with their guns, just so he didn't get uppity.

'Lilith,' one of the Eldest spluttered. 'Her name was Lilith.'

Mother Lilith tried nodding, but gave it up after one of her retainers sprained an ankle, it's true. God created two of each animal, in the beginning. Adam and Lilith were moulded from the same clay. It was only later, after Lilith rebelled, that he had to make another mate for Adam.'

'Hence his decision to use spare ribs,' Bernice interjected. 'I know this story. It's found in various gnostic versions of Christian scripture. It was excised from the orthodox texts in the first few centuries An. Lilith refused to do Adam's

bidding, so she got chucked out of Eden. Hang on. You're not going to tell me you're her, are you?'

Mother Lilith smiled weakly. 'No. The history tells us that after leaving Eden, she gave birth to a new Tribe. *Our* Tribe. The Eldest of die Tribe is always named in her honour.'

'Yeti?' said Mr Misnomer. He sounded genuinely horrified. 'You're saying the first woman spawned a bunch of monkeys?' The guards got a bit excited at that, and poked him aggressively for some time.

'Yes Boy Ice-Cream,' said Bernice.

'I beg your pardon?'

'It's the best-selling T-shirt on Glomi IV. The piglet people of Glomi IV have got a thing about human culture. It's very fashionable, in their neck of the woods. A native company there started printing T-shirts that said "Yes Boy Ice-Cream", because those were the three words in English they'd heard human tourists use the most. They had no idea what the words actually meant.'

Around one hundred and forty eyes stared blankly at Bernice.

'It reminds me of what's happening here.' she explained. 'Your culture is full of human symbolism, but it doesn't sound like you understand any of it. You've taken a bunch of basic myth patterns and twisted them to suit this environment. Or somebody has. Tell me about MEPHISTO, anyway. Where does he, she or it fit into the story?'

'MEPHISTO is the God who was cast out by God,' said the Eldest of the Eldest. 'It was because of MEPHISTO, because of the very idea of MEPHISTO, that Lilith rebelled.'

Ash was nodding, although Bernice hadn't the foggiest idea why. 'The idea of MEPHISTO?' Bernice queried.

'Yes. The idea. But you'll find your own truth when we reach the sun. You can ask all the questions you feel you need to. I promise you, you'll get the answers you want to hear.'

'You're Meister Kryptosa?' Lucretia asked. The words were coming easily now. She was starting to get used to the idea of

being numbered among the living dead, and it didn't feel any different from being alive. What the hell.

The man in the pool raised an eyebrow, an action that caused a large part of his skull to drip back into the pink gunge around him. 'You've heard of me. Good. Good. I was worried everyone would forget. Yes?'

'I, um... I haven't seen any of your programmes, but Ash and the professor have. They're my friends. I mean, they were the friends I had before... Look, it's sort of complicated.'

Katastrophen cleared his throat. Savagely. 'Herr Meister. We did not plan to rescue you, but we did come here in your footsteps. My name is Kommander Ernst Katastrophen of the SSSSSSS. I am here in search of the Oldest Tribe of Man.'

'The what?' said Kryptosa.

'The Oldest Tribe of Man. The genetic seed of the giants. Surely, you understand?'

Kryptosa frowned away most of his lower jaw, but his voice didn't seem affected. 'No. But, you know, there's a lot here I never understood. And I've been in here for decades, I should think. Oh, yes. Decades.'

'But this is the Pool of Life, I take it?'

'Mmm. Ahh. I suppose you could say that. The Tribe of Lilith built it, you understand. Hard to know what they're thinking, sometimes. Well. A lot of the time. All the time. Yes.'

Katastrophen's eyes positively lit up. 'The Tribe of Lilith! You've met them?'

'Can I just say something?' cut in Lucretia. All eyes turned on her. Some of them didn't even have bodies, but were floating on the surface of the pink stuff in a casually curious manner, I think we're going to get really confused in a minute. Maybe you'd better tell us your story from the beginning.'

Kryptosa smiled. 'Ah. Ordered mind. You'd make a good production assistant, yes? So. Where should I start?'

'Tell us how you got here,' Lucretia suggested.

'Yes. Of course. I'm sorry. So long since I spoke in public. Lost the... the old skill. Wait.' He paused for a moment, collecting his thoughts. Three, two, one, go. Well. It all

started back in '83. I'd just finished work on a series for the Channel 9999 called *Re-Appearing World*. About the regened environments Earth was creating around the colonies. You know? Good show. Good show. Won a Golden Apple at Kridani. Mmm.'

"Carry on,' prompted Lucretia.

'Ahh. Yes. We, that is, my producer and I, we started talking about the follow-up. We'd noticed, while we'd been filming, how some ideas kept turning up in the legends of species all across the galaxy. Archetypes. Oh yes. That was when we started thinking about the Inner World. We thought, wouldn't it be interesting to trace the myth across Earthspace and see where it took us?'

'And it brought you here,' hissed Katastrophen, impatiently.

'Mmm. In fact, it's a funny story how I found this place

'It must be,' said Lucretia, hurriedly. 'But what happened when you arrived?'

'Oh. Well. You know. I surveyed the world first. The planet hadn't been colonized yet, there were no spaceports, no facilities for film crews. I thought I'd check the place out, yes? Just me and my V-cam. Bad mistake. Never thought. Never thought I'd find anything down here. Not like this.'

Kryptosa scratched his head. It was hard to imagine a man made out of fluid having an itch, but he scratched anyway. 'Funny thing. I don't remember much about the planet, when I first got here. No. I remember being surprised. Feeling... something wasn't right. But it all seems so. So. So cloudy. Perhaps it's the way I'm remembering it. yes? I don't think I met any cavemen. Then. Not for a few days. Right at the start, there were... other things.'

Katastrophen narrowed his eyes. He's getting tense again, Lucretia thought. "Other things"?

'I don't remember. What they were. Things I can't... can't focus on. Probably just my memory, yes?' He shrugged off a whole pint of flesh. His body didn't automatically replace it, leaving him with a gaping hole in his chest. 'After the first week, I lost my way, couldn't find the way back to the

surface. I remember... thinking the landscape had changed. Then the Tribe found me. Wanted to know who I was, where I came from. They were angry. I think they blamed me for something. I don't remember. Don't remember what. They built this... this pool... as a defence.'

'Defence?' snapped Katastrophien.

'Yes. Yes. I'm sure. Against the human race. They were worried. About an invasion. Earth was surveying the sector getting so close. So close. They said I was going to be an important part of the process. Ahh. I've been here ever since. Part of the pool. A component. Does that make sense?'

Two yeti retainers scuttled forward, clutching a length of hosepipe made out of the dirigible creature's shed skin. The yeti pointed the business end at the wall of the chamber, the other end being somewhere on the far side of one of the hatchways. As Ash watched, a thick, milky substance spurted from the hose, the yeti carefully coating the surface of the wall with the stuff.

When it was over, and the yeti had scuttled away again, Ash saw that large patches of the wall had become transparent. The skin had faded, becoming a substance not unlike cellophane, albeit cellophane a good half-metre thick.' On the other side of the skin, Ash could see the night sky of the underworld. Far below, the landscape was lit by pathways of orange, lines of glowing lava that had escaped from unseen volcanoes. The view clearly made the thirteen Eldest uncomfortable.

'We find windows distracting,' Mother Lilith explained.

'We're, er, not very used to seeing the sky,' the Youngest added, it makes us a bit nervous.'

Ash glanced at Bernice. The professor had folded her hands behind her back, and now she was nodding like the university tutor she was. 'What was in the hose?'

'A hypoallergenetic acid,' said Mother Lilith. it changes the cellular structure of the skin. Temporarily, at least.'

'Hmm. Just the kind of thing the People would think of, although I doubt they'd go as far as using it on living tissue.

They've got a better-developed code of ethics than you lot, evidently.'

Ash very nearly sniggered. It was interesting, hearing the professor trying to puzzle out what was going on here. Interesting, because Ash already knew. She'd considered lolling Bernice, of course, but there didn't seem much point. You couldn't explain it, not in words. Not without a 'demonstration'.

Through the new window-wall of the dirigible. Ash saw something huge and heavy looming above them. She could almost feel it, the pressure of the sun, the gravity of an object that broke gravity's rules.

'One more question,' Bernice said. 'Why are you taking us to the sun in this thing? I've seen the hardware you've got on board. You've got transmat platforms. You could transport us to the centre of the planet and save yourselves the bother.'

For the first time, the Eldest looked genuinely amused.

'Don't be stupid,' one of them chuckled. 'You'd die.'

'We're not barbarians,' protested the Youngest.

Bernice looked nonplussed. 'But your own people use the transmats. I've seen them.'

'Only the working classes,' said Mother Lilith. 'They don't really have souls, as such. But beings such as yourself... beings of culture, after a fashion...'

Bernice jerked a thumb in the direction of the armed yeti standing behind her. 'Are you sure you want to say that kind of thing in front of the hired help?'

'Our personal retainers are loyal to the point of death. If it's convenient for them to use the transmats, then they'll use the transmats. Regardless of the philosophical consequences.'

Bernice looked suitably appalled. 'The People never used transmats,' she muttered to herself. 'I always wondered why.'

'It's a class thing,' said Mother Lilith.

Kryptosa shrugged again, losing more of his mass in the process. 'All the years I've been here, I've never understood.

No. They're very secretive, the Tribe. Please. May I ask you a question?"

'Go ahead,' said Lucretia before Katastrophen could say anything rude.

'How long have I been here? Time... is different. The rules change down here. Well. You must know, by now. Yes?'

Lucretia decided to give him a diplomatic answer. She didn't want him knowing he'd spent the last century melting. 'A long time,' she said.

'Oh. I thought so. It's his accent.' He motioned towards Katastrophen. 'I've been to most of the human colonies. Filming, researching. Never heard an accent like his before. No. I knew I must have been away a while, for voices to have changed so much.'

'It is a German accent,' spat Katastrophen, indignantly. 'And it is quite, quite traditional.'

Kryptosa looked bemused. 'German. Ah. No. I don't think so.'

Katastrophen breathed in. Hard. 'Do you doubt my ancestry?'

'Well... yes. I'm German. Myself. In upbringing, at least. And I've never heard anyone speak like you. You know? No. You sound like a bad actor from a prison-camp movie.'

Katastrophen went rigid again. Lucretia shuffled her feet.

'You're German?' he said, in a hollow kind of voice.

'Yes.'

'And this... this isn't the Pool of Life?'

Kryptosa frowned. 'I don't think I understand. No.'

'But it was built by the Tribe of Lilith? The Ancient Ones?' Lucretia could have sworn Katastrophen's voice had changed in tone, as if he was halfway to abandoning his accent, but couldn't quite persuade himself to go all the way.

'Oh, they look ancient,' agreed Kryptosa. 'But that's the way they are. Even the women have beards. I suppose it's hard, judging the age of a yeti. Yes?'

'Ik,' said Katastrophen. A little noise, stuck in the back of his throat. 'Ik. Ik.'

Kryptosa mined to Lucretia. There was very little left of his torso but a dripping ribcage and a wonky spine, now. 'So. You said you came in my footsteps, yes?'

Lucretia glanced at Katastrophen, but the *kommander* wasn't even blinking, and was thus unlikely to interrupt her. 'We found your journal. The, er, *kommander* here knew about it, somehow. I sort of accidentally bought it. At a market.'

Kryptosa blinked until his eyelids slid off. 'Journal? But all the vid-footage I took was destroyed by the Tribe, I thought.'

'Not vid-footage. Your personal journal. Y'know. Full of sketches. A lot of it was water-damaged, but -'

'I never kept a journal. The records I had were on vidspool. Can't sketch to save my life. No. Not at all.'

Lucretia had more than a little trouble dealing with this information. 'But there *was* a journal. It had your name on it and everything.'

One final shrug from the *meister*. Presumably, he'd shrugged a lot when he'd been human, and hadn't grown used to the fact that he no longer had the stability to pull it off. One arm liquefied and splashed into the Pool. 'No. No idea what you mean. I'm sorry. Please... so hard keeping my integrity here. I need. A few moments. To rest. I'm not used to... not being the man I was. You know?'

'I know,' said Lucretia, and, as it happened, she did.

'Ik,' said Katastrophen. Everyone ignored him.

The left side of Kryptosa's body fell apart. Lucretia could see a more or less intact pair of pink lungs inside the framework of the torso, and a makeshift larynx that buzzed every time he spoke. 'We'll be back after this short break,' Kryptosa bubbled. He tried to laugh, but the effort destroyed one of the lungs. 'Don't go away.'

Then he gave up trying to hold himself together. Suddenly, there was nothing there but pink fluid, splashing back into the Pool.

Lucretia turned to the *kommander*. He hadn't moved a muscle. Rigor mortis had set in without letting him die first. He was one of the walking dead, too. He'd lost everything he'd had, the poor sod. Yeah, Lucretia reminded herself, but

everything he had was rubbish. Rubbish philosophy, rubbish politics. This was probably the best thing that could have happened to him.

Somewhere nearby, there was a low, almost subsonic, hum. Lucretia didn't recognize it straight away. After all, she'd heard it only once before, and that had been at the moment of her death. You don't get used to a thing like that in a hurry.

The sound of a transmat platform being activated. She turned to face the passageway behind her. At the far end, lit by the shiny red glow of the lanterns, two spindly humanoids hopped off the metal plate. They started running towards the pool, looking faintly ridiculous with their high knee joints and long, swinging arms. The platform kept humming. More shapes arrived. The ape creatures, turning up *en masse*.

Lucretia took another look at Katastrophén, still frozen, oblivious to the soft, furry footfalls. One dead student, she thought, and one dying Nazi. Oh, sod it. We might as well give up now.

They'd run out of sky. On the other side of the transparent wall, the sun was an inverted landscape of fractured rock, hanging above the ceiling of the dirigible.

'We have arrived,' Mother Lilith intoned, formally. 'MRPHISTO awaits.'

'Whatever's waiting for us inside the sun, it isn't MEPHISTO,' Ash muttered.

Unfortunately, nobody heard her. The crew and passengers of the dirigible were all too busy screaming.

The surface of the sun opened up to the dirigible. One of the many canyon-like cracks in the rock slowly widened, until it was the size of a decent-sized football stadium or six. No light escaped from the hole, as there was no actual space beyond it where light could exist, as such.

The sun puckered its lips. The area of space-time around the hole was sucked into the darkness, and the bits the sun wasn't interested in were spat back into the atmosphere. The

atoms of the dirigible were considered interesting enough to be consumed. For the briefest of moments, several gravity cones attached to the sun - all created by recent systems glitches - shivered nervously.

The dirigible was stretched out of its natural shape as it entered the fissure, until there came a point where it simply couldn't maintain its solidity and became a kind of well-mannered liquid. No nervous system in the universe is designed to stand that sort of treatment, so every single individual on board began suffering horrifying hallucinations. In the fluid biomass, it was difficult to tell where one neurosystem ended and the next began, so, as a result, the passengers found themselves sharing their delusions. For one frightening instant, everyone knew what everyone else knew.

The yeti stitched to the surface of the dirigible began screaming along with those inside. The fact that they no longer had coherent mouths didn't seem to bother them.

Madness and noise. Epilepsy and agony. Chronic sensory overspill as the dirigible was sucked into the sun and entered the cathedral of MEPHISTO.

The cell corridor, like every other corridor in the security station, was unfurnished, unpainted and as short as it could possibly be while still allowing the footsteps of the warders to echo menacingly along it. A visitor would have been forgiven for thinking the smell in the air was the worn-in scent of blood, sweat and terror. In truth, the smell was *supposed* to make you think that. Acting on a directive from the personal advisers of Chairman Manx himself, the Force had hired scent-sculptors to create special odours for its stations, perfumes designed to act on the senses and sub-senses of the prisoners, heightening their fear and anxiety responses. The long-term holding pens smelt of urine despite having excellent sanitation facilities, while the mouth gag in the physical interrogation room had more than a whiff of the electric chair about it.

Theoretically, the scents were supposed to have no effect on the men who worked here. They were in charge, the scent-sculptors had pointed out, so the anxiety circuits of their brains shouldn't be open to stimulation. For the first time. Officer Quinton Pupp was beginning to doubt this.

In Summerfield's story, the SSSSSSS submarine had been fitted with a little speaker that went 'hiss' whenever the hatch was opened. The security station used the same kind of fakery, Pupp realized. And the boys downstairs thought the character of Kommander Katastrophen had been based on him. He thought he was a Revolutionary and a Republican; the woman in cell 13 thought he was a fascist.

Him. A fascist. In the name of the Committee...

Pupp loosened his collar. Perhaps it was the diary that had unsettled him. He held the book in his hands as he paced, flipping through pages of meaningless words and doodles. Summerfield's personal journal. Most of what he read was

incomprehensible, though Constable Aposta had backed up her account of the Stanturus Three affair. More interesting were the sticky yellow notelets that had been plastered over some of the more disturbing entries. Amendments to some devious Imperial code? Or did the delusional 'Professor' Summerfield simply enjoy rewriting the nasty little details of her life?

And there were two more prisoners to interrogate, now. They'd been brought in from McClure's Atoll an hour ago, logged, tagged, processed, dumped in cells 11 and 12. Pupp had been on his way to the first interview when he'd been diverted by the diary.

Two more prisoners. So, out of all the characters in the story, there were only three survivors...

Enough.

The woman in cell 12 wasn't what Quinton Pupp had expected. Technically, Summerfield's description of her had been accurate, but Pupp had thought he'd find someone livelier, someone with an air of adolescence about her. Even bearing in mind the processing she'd gone through, the woman's face looked dead. Her cheeks were thin, to the point of looking skeletal. Her dyed red hair was stuck down across her head, and her army-surplus outfit looked like it had been invented for an Imperial capitalist washing-powder ad. Blood, mud, egg and mammoth dung, thought Pupp.

The woman sat motionless on the sleeping slab, boots planted on the floor, hands folded in her lap, shoulders hunched. Constable Aposta was hanging around by the door, daystick at the ready, pretending the prisoner was dangerous so he could waste time in here instead of doing any proper work. The third and final figure in the cell was one of the station's medical team, dressed in the white poly foam-padded uniform common to all the support staff. The medic was hovering around the prisoner, pointing a portable neural scanner at her head, occasionally frowning, shaking his head, or making line adjustments to the hardware. The prisoner didn't even seem to notice he was there.

‘Ash Juliandis,’ Pupp said, striding into the cell and moving over to the slab. The woman looked up at him lazily, but that was all. The medic looked up at him as well, and shook his head. When she’d been processed, Juliandis had been found to have a minor neurological instability. Not enough for her to be categorized as insane and dumped in the zero-friction cells downstairs, but the medic had been pumping her with Prozac-5166b ever since.

‘We know all about you,’ Pupp told Juliandis, trying to sound conversational rather than threatening. ‘We’ve been talking to one of your friends.’

‘Oh?’ said the prisoner, without much interest.

‘You’ve had a bit of an adventure, haven’t you, Ms Juliandis? Perhaps you’d like to tell us about it.’

‘Not really.’

The medic started frowning again, and bashed the side of his handputer, as if the readings he was getting were impossible. ‘All right,’ Pupp said. ‘Let’s try this another way. Your friend the professor has been telling me a lot about what you got up to, down in the underworld. Does that surprise you?’ Juliandis shrugged. ‘I want to know if you go along with her story,’ Pupp went on, trying not to sound too patronizing. ‘Because I don’t think I can believe everything she says.’

At this, Juliandis actually laughed. The laugh was short and abrupt, so it looked more like a random muscular contraction.

‘You don’t know how true that is,’ she said. Then she looked away, focusing on the same nothing-in-particular she’d been staring at when Pupp had walked into the cell.

The medic’s name was Cafferty, and until last week he’d worked in the autopsy section. He was still in his twenties, with the kind of crew cut young members of the Security Force always seemed to think made them look tough and uncompromising, even if they were only cutting up corpses for a living. Cafferty obviously wasn’t used to the work up here in the cell areas. As he stood outside cell 12, he kept

wrinkling his big flat nose at the scent of chemically encoded criminal angst.

‘Can you get her talking?’ Pupp asked.

Cafferty frowned like a gargoyle. ‘Hard to say. I’m having a hell of a time interpreting her damn neural readings.’

Pupp scowled. Another thing young security men did was use words like ‘hell’ and ‘damn’ a lot. It was all those Imperial police vidcasts, he suspected. Give them a uniform and they think they’re *Sergeant Monkfish*. ‘What’s wrong with them?’

‘I’m reading anxiety patterns that aren’t connected to any phobic stimulus I know. That’s tech-talk, chief.’

Pupp bit his tongue, to stop himself biting Cafferty.

‘It’s not like she’s had sudden shock or a severe trauma, even,’ Cafferty babbled on. ‘Don’t know how to put it. It’s more like something’s crept in and messed up the social circuits.’

‘Then what do you suggest?’

A sharp intake of breath from Cafferty. ‘I’d say, pump her with more P-5166b. It’s got heavy tranq effects if you use it in big CCs. Another dose should take her below the consciousness threshold for a few hours, but it’ll do her good in the long run. Give her brain time to cool off.’

‘Is that the only way we’ll get answers out of her?’

‘Reckon.’

‘Then do it,’ Pupp commanded.

‘Aye aye, chief,’ said Cafferty, with hideous good cheer, and vanished back into the cell.

Pupp let his grimace stay exactly where it was. He’d been hoping Juliandis would be able to confirm his suspicions about Summerfield. He certainly wasn’t going to get the answers anywhere else; the subject in cell 11 was even less stable, according to the medics. He considered taking one of the prisoners down to the physical interrogation room, but then, if they’d been brain-wiped, they wouldn’t tell him anything new under torture. Besides, you had to fill in a hundred and one big pink forms before you could do a physical interrog.

No. He'd go back to cell 13, get Summerfield to finish her story. After that, when they were good and ready, he'd assess the other two. That was the most practical course of action. That was the only way to get the job done.

It had absolutely nothing to do with wanting to know how the story ended. Absolutely nothing at all.

The man in the padded white suit took out his hypobiro, then uttered vague words of reassurance as he stuck more of the drugs into Ash's bloodstream. He'd gone through the ritual a good half-dozen times since she'd arrived here, and Ash hadn't resisted once, even though the butch black-uniformed man by the door looked like he could do with some daystick exercise.

No resistance. No point. Because once you know the world's hollow, and there's nothing under your feet to hold you up, and everything you know stops making sense, then there's a hole in your gut everything wants to drop through, and everything is ugly, the tranqs are kicking in, but I know why ugly things are ugly and why God needs a MEPHISTO and why the underworld is an underworld like hell and I know why there's a pool full of genetic matter down there even though nothing has any genes and the mammoths are dancing around pink dirigibles the yeti go marching two by two the *kommander* at the *kontrols* falling out of the sky catching fire over the mountain lights on the ground coming closer we're all going to bum the sky is falling the ground is opening and everything is cold and everything is wet and everything is *wrong* and

'SLAVES OF THE MACHINE GOD!'

It had the atmosphere of a cathedral, anyway. As if years of religious glamour had been pressed into the air molecules. The walls - or rather, wall, singular - was curved, forming a perfect sphere, like a miniature version of the Inner World itself. With no visible landmarks, even guessing the size of the cathedral was tricky, though Bernice would have put money on 'bleeding huge'. Kilometres across, at least.

Through the transparent skin, she tried to make out the details of the wall at the point nearest the dirigible. There was the same blaze of colour you'd expect from cathedrals inside Earthspace, suggesting that the vast acreage of the wall was covered in stained-glass windows. Stained glass could shine only if there was light from outside, though, and Bernice suspected there wasn't really any outside to this place.

Stained glass. She thought of the time Michelangelo must have spent working on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, the weeks of muttering 'pass the cerulean' and 'ooh my back'. Who'd crafted this place, which was effectively one big ceiling the size of a city?

'This isn't the centre of the planet,' Bernice mused, aloud, pretending she hadn't been screaming her bottom off a few seconds earlier.

'You think so?' That was Mother Lilith, sounding genuinely curious for once.

Bernice nodded. 'This is where the artificial gravity of Tyler's Folly is being controlled from, isn't it? Having that kind of gravitational hardware actually inside the planet would be pretty much suicidal. One little fault and you could end up sitting on top of a naked singularity. This area's

outside of normal space-time. A gravity pocket, I'd guess. Am I close?'

Mother Lilith waved a withered arm towards the window-wall. There was something else floating around inside the cathedral area. Bernice could see that now. It was right in front of the dirigible, but large enough for its edge to be visible from the side of the chamber. The shape was irregular, a fungal blue-grey in colour, and Bernice got the impression of something organic, something lumps of biological matter had either grown from or adhered to over time.

She glanced over her shoulder at Mother Lilith, and tried to interpret the look the old yeti gave her in return. Weariness? Relief? Pity?

'I hope you're part of the process,' the Eldest of the Eldest said, i honestly do. But one cannot oppose MEPHISTO's will.'

'I'm happy to hear that,' Bernice replied, stapling on a smile, if I fail miserably now, I won't feel anywhere near as bad about it. Thanks.'

The second death was, if anything, worse than the first. On arriving (coming into being?) at the transmat platform, Lucretia tried reconstructing die last few moments of her former life, and reached the conclusion that she'd been conscious during the transmission, even though the Henson Channel had insisted this wasn't possible. She remembered being pulled through a big black wall, data-atom by data-atom. It had actually felt like dying, this time.

Lucretia Scannon III blinked. She was in the belly of a dirigible, much larger than the last one. Katastrophen stood by her side on the transmat plate, still breathing heavily, and Lucretia could smell the pelts of the two orange-robed apes who'd teleported along with them.

There was a hole in the middle of the floor nearby, a tear in the dirigible's belly that had been pinned open and turned into a hatchway, a skin ladder tied to its lip. Lucretia could smell ancient, church-scented air wafting into the dirigible

from below. Standing around the hole were three familiar human shapes, surrounded by a gaggle of armed ape people.

‘We had orders not to use die transmat on the humans,’ an ape by the hatchway protested.

One of the robed individuals shrugged. ‘They were dead anyway. Does it matter?’

With a kind of supernatural calm only the dead can manage, Lucretia stepped off the platform, the apes making no move to stop her. Both Ash and Professor Summerfield looked up at her as she ambled towards them. The latter seemed momentarily startled, then momentarily happy. The former just nodded.

Lucretia walked right up to Ash. The yeti guards covered her with their needles.

‘I’m dead,’ Lucretia said. ‘How about you?’

Ash smiled. They embraced. It would have been a comfort hug, if there’d been any comfort here at all.

Kalaslophen hobbled over to them, limping wildly on the spongy floor. ‘Professor Summerfield. We must talk. I have discovered... things, about this place. Terrible things. Tyler’s Folly is not what I believed -’

‘You,’ one of the apes interrupted. ‘Down. Now.’

He prodded the professor in the arm, and indicated the hatchway with the end of his weapon. Professor Summerfield tutted, then got down on her knees to grab the ladder. ‘No time for a happy reunion,’ she said. ‘That’s the problem with you young evolved simians. All rush, rush, rush...’

She kept gabbling, but the words were lost as she vanished through the hatchway. After a quick nudge from one of the guards, Mr Misnomer followed her down.

Lucretia looked up at Ash. ‘You know, don’t you?’ she said.

‘Yeah,’ said Ash.

‘I... think I do, too. I keep getting ideas... It took me a while to figure out where they were coming from. I keep thinking of the name. MEPHISTO.’

Ash’s expression didn’t change. ‘They put you through a transmat. I’m sorry.’

Something jabbed Lucretia's shoulder. 'You next,' a yeti grumbled in her ear. 'Move.'

Bernice had been right about the thing that floated inside the cathedral. It had grown outward from a central core, though whether bits had been bolted on by the yeti or simply sprouted from its skin, she couldn't say.

The object was machine-like, and roughly the same size as the archaeology faculty back at the university. Pieces of misshapen hardware sprouted from a body covered in bubbles of synthetic flesh, so you could hardly make out the thing's shape for the blisters. Great lumps of blue-grey biomass floated on the tips of metre-thick tendrils, while pod-shaped reactors drooped from black pipelines that looked like they'd been ripped out of a Victorian gasworks. The device hung in the air at the dead centre of the cathedral, so every surface sprouted organic appendages, including the underside.

The same visceral technology, noted Bernice, as had inspired the design of the dirigibles. A kilometre or two in the distance, the stained-glass wall filled the air with a polychrome glow that would have made Jackson Pollock hurl. Not only was it agony on the optic nerves, but also made following the precise outline of the machine impossible, as the edge of the shape blurred into the background.

A huge metal spike extended from one side of the machine, a good fifty metres in length. The surface of the spike was flat, carpeted in grey scales not unlike those of the dirigible. It was at the narrow end of this extension that Bernice stood, the belly of the dirigible hovering at the top of the ladder, high above her head.

She tried bouncing on her heels. Gravity seemed Earth-normal on the platform. Nothing was holding the machine up, though, Bernice guessed the gravity was being generated by the platform itself.

Mr Misnomer landed behind her with a *k-thomp*, having jumped down the last few metres of the ladder. He regained his posture with catlike grace, the big ponce. Then he

squinted towards the main body of the machine at the far end of the platform. Bernice felt like she was standing at the end of the Yellow Brick Road.

‘That’s MEPHISTO?’ Mr Misnomer asked, with some distaste.

‘Mmmm. Some kind of computer, I’d say. It makes sense. The Tribe of Lilith bears all the signs of a manipulated high-technology culture.’

‘Any idea who built it?’

‘Nope. Hopefully, it’ll tell us. Megalomaniac artificial superintelligences have a habit of revealing their insane programming at every opportunity.’

‘Is that all?’ asked Lucretia.

Ash and Lucretia had reached the platform now. Bernice frowned at them. ‘I beg your pardon?’

‘I was expecting something a bit different,’ Lucretia complained. ‘A bit more... I don’t know... unexpected. I mean, a big mad computer? It’s like meeting a bunch of aliens and finding out they’re green men from the planet Zargon.’

‘Is there really a planet Zargon?’ queried Ash.

Bernice said ‘no’ and Mr Misnomer said ‘yes’ at the same time.

Lucretia kept talking. ‘I don’t know. I just thought MEPHISTO would be...’

‘Taller?’ Bernice suggested.

‘So, what do we do now?’ asked Ash, as if she already knew the answer.

‘Follow the Yellow Brick Road,’ Bernice replied. ‘Follow the Yellow Brick Road. Follow, follow, follow, follow... Why’s everybody looking at me like that?’

The world shook. Correction: the sun shook. There was a moment of normal gravity inside the gravity cone, when Fos!ca thought she’d start falling back to the surface, but then she was weightless again.

She’d lost !X, probably for good. He’d gone into the sun, gone to meet MEPHISTO. Daring her to follow? Doubtful. She was no longer important to him. He’d shown her a whole new

world of screaming red murder, then gone and left her alone in the middle of it. Of course, losing !X meant she'd lost her assignment as well, but professional pride didn't mean very much when you were trapped in a world that wanted to kill you.

Kill. The word sounded hollow in her head, now she'd seen what it meant. There was that image again, !X in the jungle, driving the branch between the ribs of the primitive. One second in time, etched into the memory cells, where even the most advanced personological therapy wouldn't be able to scrub it away. She'd be panicking, if her glands hadn't already pumped every nerve coolant they could synthesize into her bloodstream. She was no longer chemically capable of shock or horror, she knew that.

So what did that make her?

One of the Truly Crazy ?

Or...?

!X had never killed, not in the worldsphere, not unless you counted Paradise. He'd been declared sociopathic, but he'd never gone on what barbarian publications liked to call a 'killing spree'. The Do[EO]C kept full records of all his victims, pictures and textual descriptions of every injury he'd caused, every disfigurement he'd engineered. When the personologists had gone to the asylum continent to cure him, he'd broken their faces apart, shattered their bones in such a way that even the best reconstructionists couldn't put them back in order. It was a very precise science, the Do[EO]C said. In the end, all of those he'd mutilated had genetically recreated themselves. They'd become birds, set up a home for themselves in the sunforests of siRani alQilla. They hadn't been able to face the idea of being people any more.

He'd hurt a dozen others, before God had managed to confine him. Everyone had wondered how you could outsmart God long enough to do that sort of damage, but !X had managed it. Several victims had been assaulted with cytotoxins, making them ugly at a subcellular level. Their DNA had been twisted, terrible scratches left through the double helix, so no matter how much regen surgery they had,

no matter what species they tried to become, they'd always bear the mark.

He'd never killed, not until now. He'd just made people ugly.

Fos!ca was no longer chemically capable of shock or horror.

So what did that make her?

One of the Truly Crazy?

Or just as ugly as all the other victims?

Fos!ca fell herself falling again. It occurred to her that if the gravity cone had collapsed, she'd be killed when she hit the ground. On the other hand, perhaps the cone was still active, and she'd pushed herself towards the surface without realizing it. It was possible, she supposed, if her survival instincts were still functional. It would be simple enough to test which of these two possibilities was true, anyway. When she got close to ground level, she'd try to stop moving. If she succeeded, she'd know some impulse still had the will to escape from !X and the underworld. If she failed, she'd die. Really, it was quite straightforward.

Bernice was within spitting distance of the MEPHISTO machine before she realized it had a face.

A perfect circle of metal hung from the front of the machine well above eye level, suspended by metal cords that looked uncomfortably like tendons. The disc was bright yellow, six metres across, the colour clashing hideously with the grey boil-like growths sprouting around it. Either it had only just grown from the machine's body, or it had only just become active. Otherwise, they'd have seen it the second they'd set foot on the spike.

The yellow surface was marked with three shapes. Two dark ovoids, and below them a black line, a semicircle turned upwards.

A smiley face. Like one of those appalling badges they used to wear on Earth in the 1960s, although the eyes had little black eyebrows drawn on to them, upturned, so the face seemed to be smiling with mischief. Or even malice. As Bernice watched, two small red horns sprouted from the top

of the disc at the face's temples. The face of a happy little demon.

'The face of MEPHISTO,' Bernice mumbled.

They all stopped moving, is this someone's idea of a joke?' scowled Mr Misnomer.

'Not necessarily. It's a highly stylized graphic. If the machine wants to put across an image of itself as a demonic icon, this might be the most direct way of doing it.'

'Or maybe it's someone's idea of a joke,' Lucretia suggested.

'Hello,' said a voice.

Bernice jumped. Mr Misnomer jumped, then sneered, as if it'd stop him looking soft. Lucretia jumped, though nowhere near as much as you'd expect. Ash didn't bother jumping at all.

'I've been expecting you,' the voice went on.

Bernice tried to get a grip on its accent, but it didn't seem to have one. Everybody was looking at her. Evidently, she'd been elected the spokesperson of the group. 'Oh,' she said. 'Oh. Have you? Good. Well, we've all been wanting to meet you, too.'

'I didn't say I wanted to meet you. I said I'd been expecting you.' The voice didn't sound at all grumpy about this. It was simply being precise.

'Never mind. I'm sure we've got a lot to talk about. You're MEPHISTO, then?'

'No.'

There was a moment's pause, the kind of embarrassed silence you usually get only at dinner parties. 'No?'

'I'm sorry. I should explain.' And something moved, right in front of them. Bernice did a double take. It was a figure, a humanoid figure, and it was crouching before their very eyes, hunched against the body of the machine, right underneath the yellow disc. Possibly it had been spewed out of the guts of the mechanism while they'd been busy looking at MEPHISTO's face. On the other hand, the figure had the same kind of semisynthetic quality as the machine, even though its skin was much lighter, so they might just have missed it altogether.

‘Oh, shit,’ said Ash.

The figure unfolded, stood upright, stepped forward. His limbs moved in a way that wasn’t quite human, with almost paranormal physical confidence. Bernice recalled her short spell at the Academy, being taught the basic positions of the Hai Dow Chi, the instructors telling her that once her body got the hang of it, her joints wouldn’t ever forget the form. This person, whoever he was, moved with the same worn-in grace.

But his skin... smooth, white, almost plastic. He was bald, but you’d expect him to be. His having hair would be like a skeleton having hair: it’d look stupid. His face was so simple, it was almost cartoon-like. Two deep-set eyes, a small, straight mouth, a bump for a nose. Technically, all the features a human being should have, but stripped down to their simplest symbolic level.

The worldsphere, thought Bernice. The drones on the worldsphere, the machine people who got offended if you called them robots. They had little icons for faces, minimalized expressions. This man was the same. She looked up at the face of MEPHISTO, then down at the figure who’d stopped a few feet in front of her. Their faces weren’t the same, by any means, but they had the same kind of stylization.

The pale thing nodded, as if he’d guessed what conclusions Bernice was drawing. ‘My name is si!Xist-ilxati-iVa!qara. You should call me !X.’

‘Aspirated consonants,’ said Bernice, almost choking on the words. ‘You’re from the worldsphere. You’re a ro- a machine.’

!X considered this for a moment. ‘No,’ he decided. ‘Definite lines can’t always be drawn between biological and mechanical organisms. I have biological and mechanical lineage. It’s not something I think about.’ !X raised his hands, as if in offering. With a start, Bernice saw Kryptosa’s journal sitting in his outstretched palms. Gingerly, she took it from him - making sure not to touch his skin - then unzipped the satchel around her neck and returned the book to its pouch.

She wanted to ask where he'd got it from, but Mr Misnomer stepped in first. 'I'm not following any of this. Who are you? What's your connection with MEPHTSTO?'

!X looked up, fixing his eyes on the disc of MEPHISTO's face. 'Perhaps you should ask the machine,' he suggested.

'MEPHISTO can communicate directly?' queried Bernice.

'No.'

Any further questions suddenly seemed unnecessary. The horns had retracted into the disc, and the face had faded away, becoming a circle of pure black. Points of light began to emerge from the darkness where the eyes and mouth had been. The image of a starfield, Bernice realized.

'It's like a V-set.' Lucretia said.

'It's a lot of things,' replied !X.

The stars on the display disc shifted and turned, as if the viewer were moving forward, hurtling through the galaxy at a rate of light-knots. The stars shot past too quickly for Bernice to make out any constellations, but she doubted she'd recognize them anyway.

The viewers tumbled through space, towards an entirely unfamiliar destination, as the MEPHISTO machine began to tell its story in pictures.

THE TIME THAT THE PEOPLE FORGOT!

‘So, what happens now?’ asked the Angriest of the Eldest. He loaded his voice with some of the extra-special super-strength contempt he’d bottled up over the years.

‘We let MEPHISTO recognize MEPHISTO’s own,’ Mother Lilith declared.

‘Don’t be so bloody cryptic. What in the name of Great Nombo are we supposed to do while we’re waiting for a result?’

Mother Lilith signalled for him to be silent. ‘MEPHISTO has already started to work on the archaeologist, but she needs time. And she’s clever. She may realize the machine isn’t powerful enough to control the entire ecosystem. If she does, she might deduce the nature of MEPHISTO before the process has finished with her.’

‘More psychobabble,’ snorted the Angriest. ‘Are we going to sit here gabbling while the world falls apart around our ears?’

‘Quite possibly,’ said Mother Lilith.

The planet hung in the vacuum below Bernice, turning with a grace and majesty you wouldn’t have expected from what was essentially a vaporous ball of rock. The surface was carpeted with whorls of twinkling silver gas, swirling with elegant vortices and transient currents...

Hold on a sec.

Bernice stamped her feet. She was still standing on the platform in the cathedral. She closed her eyes, in an attempt to blank out her visual circuits, then opened them again. Yup. Just as she’d thought. The silver planet was a picture on the viewing disc of the MEPHISTO machine. The others,

including the being called !X, were all concentrating on the image, most of them barely remembering to blink.

Across the interior surface of the cathedral, the curved wall was shifting, the stained glass turning itself into an enormous kaleidoscope. That was it. The cathedral was having a hallucinatory, even hypnotic, effect. The viewing disc was a focus, drawing the viewer into the image until it almost felt like being there. The brain filled in the blanks unconsciously, so, as she'd hovered in deep space, Bernice had been able to feel the weightlessness of the void, the warmth of the gases on the surface of the planet.

What the heck. It was no worse than any other form of entertainment.

Seconds later, she was hovering above the planet again. Bernice dropped towards the world - as if gravity meant anything up here - tumbling towards the outer layer of gas.

A couple of clicks above the surface, she realized it wasn't gas at all. It was architecture. Towers, arches, pyramids of crystal and prismatic minarets. Millions upon millions upon millions upon millions of buddings, all glittering with the same silver light, none staying still for a moment. The structures seemed to float, and the currents of vapour were actually rivers of geometric design, the buildings shunting each other across the curvature of the planet.

Somebody hiccuped. Lucretia, Bernice surmised. She saw rooms separating themselves from some of the larger constructions, floating away like spores, ready to sprout into iceberg palaces at a moment's notice.

'It's all very biblical,' noted Ash, somewhere on the borderlands of Bernice's perception.

'Mmm?' said Bernice, astutely.

'The imagery. Endless cities, seas of glass and flesh, et cetera, et cetera. It's a lot like the hallucinogenic visions experienced by some of the biblical prophets.'

'Mmm,' Bernice agreed, wondering how Ash could still put sentences together like that.

Without warning, she felt herself swivel around to face the sky. A sudden change in camera angle, she supposed.

Something was sweeping into view out of the nighttime darkness, a cloud of light and electrical fire, rolling over the horizon like a thunderhead. Bernice was right in its path. She tried to get away, but escape wasn't in the shooting script.

Lucretia mumbled a single word. At the time, Bernice thought she was blaspheming out of shock. Only later did it occur to her that Lucretia had been the first to identify the cloud.

It blazed across the world, tendrils of light and fire licking at Bernice's skin, welding her clothes to her flesh, making her break out in a psychosomatic sweat. There was something at the heart of the maelstrom, something no human being was supposed to witness, so she had trouble getting her eyes to concentrate on it. Roughly speaking, it was a face, and it reminded her of every other face she'd ever seen. It wasn't big, it was blooming well omnipresent. The clouds rang with the voices of harmony and the songs of the thunder.

It was, in a very real sense, God.

'This isn't real,' Bernice hissed. 'I mean, this isn't an actual record of events. Look at it. It's a stylized portrait of God, the way human orthodox religion describes it. Light and fire. MEPHISTO isn't showing us what really happened: we're being told a story.'

'Yes,' affirmed !X. 'MEPHISTO is using a cultural filter to communicate the relevant ideas. Describing events in terms appropriate to human culture.'

Now she knew this wasn't actually the almighty, Bernice felt a little more comfortable being so close to the cloud. She noticed other forms, hovering around the edges of the burning mass. Faces, much like God's, but smaller and easier to focus on. Each of the faces had a pair of wings. Angels, then. Seraphim. Everything here was a sign, a symbolic part of the story. In the beginning, MEPHISTO related, there was God, an intelligence without limit, which had made the world and which held it, and the People who lived on it, together.

Bernice clicked her fingers. 'The worldsphere. The planet below us represents the worldsphere. A paradise place. And God is the name of the intelligence who manages it. We're watching the history of the People, aren't we?'

She'd aimed the question at !X, but he didn't answer. Bernice was too busy picking up MEPHISTO's next few concepts to ask again. God, the story explained, surrounded himself with subintelligences, independent of himself, yet part of his function...

Bernice remembered the ships of the worldsphere, great artificial intelligences billions of times smarter than any man form. And they had wings, symbolically speaking. Angels?

She was distracted by a commotion up above, a brief War in Heaven. One of the angels was moving in an erratic fashion, breaking out of the casual orbits held by the others. The face of the angel bore an unhappy expression, and it flapped its wings petulantly. The others gathered around it. In the centre of the cloud, God looked on, paternal and disapproving.

One of the angels had rebelled, defied God's authority. The old Lucifer story, Bernice noted, with the inevitable ending. She saw the face flutter away, the rest of the angels forming a pursuit formation behind it, until they were sure it was well away from the cloud. The fallen angel vanished into the darkness, and peace returned to paradise.

The universe lurched. Bernice was pushed through space at good ol' maximum warp, and knew she was following the flight plan of the fallen angel. Suns passed her by at ludicrous speeds. There was a period of darkness as she left the galaxy.

At last, the fallen angel hit the ground. The planet was a desolate lump of rock, as planets tended to be, but it had the potential for life. The angel gave one final flap of its wings before cracking open the mantle of the world and embedding itself in the substrata. The planet shook, as new versions of gravity and evolution exploded in its core, planted there by the exile, the renegade, the one who wanted to usurp God's

authority. The one who wanted to build a kingdom to rival God's, or at least to parody it.

In human terms, MEPHISTO.

The impact was enough to make Bernice blink, and the blink ended the hallucination. The rest of her party were all waking up, shaking their heads, rubbing their eyes. The disc above them had gone back into smiley-face mode. The cathedral wall had stopped pulsing. The show was well and truly over.

Mr Misnomer clenched his teeth. It was a nervous habit, but people had taken it to be a sign of grim determination over the years, so he'd never bothered giving it up.

Only !X was still looking at the disc. 'MEPHISTO came from the worldsphere,' Bernice concluded. 'God threw one of the larger artificial intelligences out, and this is the result. The Inner World of Tyler's Folly.'

!X didn't answer.

'Doesn't make sense,' Mr Misnomer said. 'The Inner World looks to me like it's based on old dinosaur flicks. What's that got to do with God and the Devil? This place is something out of a pulpzine. It's not Hell.'

'Isn't it?' said Ash.

Everyone turned to look at her. Even !X.

Ash shrugged. 'Oobert Valdeburg wrote a whole book on subterranean archetypes. It's a standard text. That's why I went to Professor Summerfield's Martian lecture in the first place. Valdeburg said the imagery of Inner World myths and the imagery of Hell myths is pretty consistent. Even if a culture doesn't know the centre of the planet's full of lava, a lot of the time it still has stories about how hot it is down there. People start off thinking the underworld's full of demons and the fires of damnation. Then, when they develop scientific methods, the stories evolve. Instead of Hell, the core gets filled with prehistoric monsters and exploding volcanoes. Same basic line of thought, though. That's why Neanderthals in pulpzine stories always worship some kind of satanic idol.'

'Contrived,' Mr Misnomer declared.

‘Not really. Remember, MEPHISTO’s using images we’re used to. The cultural filter knows it’s not a big leap between the Inner World ideas this place is based on and the Christian images in that story we just saw.’

‘So MEPHISTO built the underworld?’ Lucretia sounded either unconvinced or disappointed. ‘That still doesn’t make sense. Where did the idea come from to have it full of dinosaurs? That’s a human thing, isn’t it?’

‘MEPHISTO thrives on the ideas of others,’ !X announced. Bernice shook her head. ‘But if Tyler’s Folly has been this way for millions of years, then

‘I don’t think you understand,’ !X interrupted. ‘This isn’t a subject for discussion. MEPHISTO thrives on the ideas of others. You’re all products of an expanding culture MEPHISTO has had no contact with for almost a century. You’re necessary to the continuation of the process.’

Mr Misnomer felt the muscles across his chest tighten. His reflexes knew a threat when they heard one. ‘Necessary? How?’

‘You will become part of the MEPHISTO operating system. Your cultural experience will be integrated into the environment. The Inner World will develop accordingly.’ There was a moment’s silence while everybody stared at him. The man’s body language was wrong, Mr Misnomer noted. He didn’t look like he was getting ready to pounce. Which meant that if they were going to be attacked -

He’d taken up combat stance even before he heard the creaking, grinding sound from up above. On either side of the yellow disc, parts of the MEPHISTO machine were unravelling, cords and electronic filaments detaching themselves from the central section of the body. Electrical currents sparked across newly formed cybernetic neural systems, the charge attracting other pieces of material, blue-grey chunks of metal that ripped themselves out of the machine and knotted themselves together, crunching and groaning, fusing and popping.

Finally, two solid forms hit the floor, sub-machines spawned from the body of MEPHISTO. Each of the

mechanisms was a good two metres in height, and roughly humanoid in shape. Their heads were glass bubbles full of fungal biomass, bolted to armour-plated bodies. Their arms were long and powerful, ending in gigantic pincers, each pair big enough to squeeze a human head to bursting point. Mr Misnomer found the design vaguely familiar. Doctor Harbinger, his old arch nemesis in the thirties, had used similar machines during his attempt to uncover the ghastly secrets of Lost Atlantis.

!X watched the machines without great interest. The others all started to back away.

‘Oh, good grief,’ mumbled Bernice. ‘*Amazing Stories* robots. Listen to me, !X. Think about what you’re doing.’

!X looked curious, but didn’t act. The two robotic henchmen stepped forward, their heavy metal feet thumping the platform in unison. The floor shook. Mr Misnomer flexed his biceps.

Bernice kept talking as she reversed along the platform ‘MEPHISTO won’t stop once we’ve been “assimilated”. You must know that. The machine will take you, as well.’

‘I’m already part of the process,’ !X assured her. ‘I was part of the process even before I arrived here.’ The robots picked up speed, started walking towards the party with big, confident strides. Their pincers snapped menacingly.

‘I don’t understand. How’s that possible?’

!X said nothing. The humans kept backing away, but it wasn’t doing them much good.

One of the machines swung its arm. Lucretia Scannon was standing directly in its path.

Mr Misnomer spontaneously invented a battle cry, and hurled himself forward.

The world turned upside down. The gravity of the platform let go of Lucretia’s feet, not being able to match the pull of the robot as it hauled her into the air. She saw the world as a set of colourful smudges: the blue-grey blur that was the MEPHISTO machine, the multicoloured pile of sick that was the far-off wall of the cathedral, the dark smear that was

probably Mr Misnomer. The robot's pincers were clamped around her torso, pressing into her kidneys. She started to make sense of the sounds around her, tried to match the voices with their owners.

'Lucretia! Try and...'

'Get out of its way! No!'

'Bastard machine. Bastard -'

'...wriggle out of its grip...'

'Stop hitting it, you idiot! You're not doing anything...'

'...look out!'

'Get out of my way! Get-out-of-my-way!'

The next sensation Lucretia felt was pain, as she hit the lizardskin floor. Unprepared for the drop, she fell on to her face. Something snapped out of place in her nose.

The robot had let go of her. She heard its feet stomping away, and looked up.

Mr Misnomer had somehow weaved his way around the robots. Now he was standing right in front of the MEPHISTO machine, beneath the yellow disc, where the device was plated with what looked like access panels, tiles of organic-looking plastic sealed together with biological gunge. Mr Misnomer was pounding his fists against the panels. His knuckles were bleeding, but the plates were cracking, grey lubricant oozing out of the fractures. The two robots were thumping back towards the machine, obviously having identified Mr Misnomer as a priority target. Ash and Bernice were standing a little way up the platform from Lucretia, watching with blank expressions.

The access panels splintered. The air was full of sparks. Lucretia had to cover her eyes, but she saw Mr Misnomer through her fingers, standing with his hands thrust into the guts of the machine. Electricity was racking his body, the current so strong you could actually see the little blue energy-lines crackling across his skin. He must have been in agony. Lucretia couldn't see his expression, but she guessed he had that look of grim determination on his face again.

The robots paused, freezing in mid-stomp, as if wondering whether to risk getting any closer.

‘It’s got to have one,’ Mr Misnomer hissed. *‘It’s got to have one.’*

‘What are you doing?’ Bernice yelled.

‘Doctor Harbinger’s Megalomanopticon had one,’ Mr Misnomer growled, apparently talking to himself. ‘The mad computer that enslaved the Crab People of Kqwi-Omega III had one. The Nemesis Doomsday Engine had one.’

The robots started moving again. Pincers snapping, they closed in on him. They were a good five metres away, but each step took them a metre closer.

‘What is it?’ howled Bernice. ‘What? Tell me!’

THUMP, went the robots.

‘Hah!’ cried Mr Misnomer. Lucretia saw his muscles tighten, as if his hand had closed around something inside the machine.

THUMP.

Mr Misnomer had his hand on the lever before he even saw the device. The hole he’d punched through the front of the machine was small, but you could still see the corner of the box there inside MEPHISTO’s internal workings. The box was made of metal, a bright red in colour, a violent contrast to the fungal blues and greys of the rest of the machine. It was bolted together with huge rivets, and set into its upper surface was the heavy lever, the kind of mechanism you’d expect to make a satisfying screeching noise when you pulled it. Stencilled across the metal were several Arabesque symbols in Day Glo black, recognizable as warning signs even if you couldn’t read the language.

The Megalomanopticon. The mad dictator of Kqwi-Omega III. The Doomsday Engine. Seventy years, since he’d started this life, and things hadn’t changed a bit. The device was in exactly the place he’d expected it to be, even.

THUMP. Mr Misnomer felt a waft of air across the back of his neck, a pincer swinging for him and only just falling short.

‘All mad computers have built-in self-destruct units,’ he snarled. ‘Fact of life.’

He pulled the lever. It made a satisfying screeching noise.

The Angriest of the Eldest froze in mid-sneer. He stared out through the skin of the dirigible, at the wall of the cathedral in the distance. The other twelve Eldest stared too, as did their numerous retainers. Some of the younger yeti were so shocked, they actually stumbled and dropped the ancients they were supporting. There were bouncing sounds around the Chamber as bloated craniums hit the fleshy floor.

The glass of the cathedral wall had started pulsing. This in itself was nothing unusual. The problem was. every single piece of glass was pulsing with the same colour, a brilliant, startling red. The wall turned into a featureless expanse of scarlet, bright one second, dark the next. With no way of judging the curvature of the interior, the redness seemed to go on for ever.

The Angriest turned to Mother Lilith, and, for the first time since the Traveller had arrived, there was foam forming on his lips. 'The humans. They've done this.'

Mother Lilith shook her head. The motion surprised everyone, not least her retainers, who suddenly seemed surplus to requirements. 'The self-destruct system has been engage! MEPHISTO dies by MEPHISTO's own will.'

The Angriest was very near speechless. 'You *expected* this?'

'Suspected. Not expected.'

'Then this is the end?' asked the Youngest, his voice trembling.

In the throbbing red light, Mother Lilith's face look older than it ever had before. 'The process never ends. We're probably going to die, that's all.'

'COUNTDOWN!'

The robots had stopped dead, their pincers frozen centimetres away from the back of Mr Misnomer's neck. Now the machines were staring up at the disc, where the smiley face had faded to black and been replaced by glowing white numbers, in the traditional digital typeface.

300. 299. 298.

Mr Misnomer turned to Bernice. His teeth were clenched. The pose would have looked heroic, if she hadn't seen the way the power had been coursing through his body. The agony had locked his jaw in that position.

'Don't just stand there,' he hissed. '*Run.*'

295. 294.

Bernice was back at the skin ladder of the dirigible in what seemed like a second, her legs moving in time to the pulsing of the cathedral. The light, she realized, had practically hypnotized her, sending her mind to Planet X and leaving her body to run on auto. Now she'd reached her destination, she was back in charge of her limbs again. She could hear Mr Misnomer belting along the platform at her heels, the lighter footsteps of Ash and Lucretia behind him -

As if by magic, !X appeared, calmly stepping out from behind the ladder. The ladder was hardly solid or stable enough to have concealed him properly; he must have some really neat kind of camouflage, thought Bernice. Or maybe he knew how to make himself look harmless, so the subconscious mind didn't register him as a threat. Presumably, he'd made his way to the ladder as soon as the robots had popped out of the machine.

'It's over,' Bernice said, skidding to a halt. 'Whoever you really are, whatever it is you think you're doing. MEPHISTO

is going to self-destruct. There's no point standing in our way.'

'I agree,' said !X.

Bernice felt hot, synonicotine-tainted breath scraped the back of her neck. Mr Misnomer was by her side, fists clenched, teeth still bared. She put a hand across the old man's chest, to stop him launching himself at !X, and shook her head.

'Get up the ladder,' she told him. 'Make sure the others are OK. MEPHISTO's going to blow any minute.'

Mr Misnomer gave her a funny look, then gave an even funnier look to !X, nodded grudgingly, and started to climb. Ash and Lucretia shuffled up to the ladder behind him.

'It's a fraud,' Ash said into Bernice's ear. 'Don't you get it? It's big enough to control the gravity systems, maybe even bolt together a couple of servitor robots, but -'

'Not now,' Bernice snapped. 'Get on board. Quickly.'

Ash paused, then started to climb the ladder, Lucretia right behind her. Bernice turned her attention back to !X.

'It doesn't end here, Professor Summerfield,' he said.

Bernice tried not to sound surprised. 'You know who I am? No, forget I asked. What do you mean? It's not over?'

!X nodded towards the other end of the platform. Bernice looked over her shoulder. The disc display read 175.

'Go,' said !X.

So Bernice went.

She scaled the ladder, on more than one occasion twisting her body aside to avoid the shapes that fell from the hatchway above. Yeti guards, still clutching their weapons. Evidently, Mr Misnomer was heroically socking it to 'em up there. The dirigible was turning overhead, slowly and clumsily.

By the time she reached the hatchway, the others had vanished into the guts of the vessel. A second before she hauled herself into the craft, she looked down. On the platform far below her, standing among the crumpled bodies of fallen yeti, stood !X.

His posture was as relaxed as it had always been, and he was gazing up at her emotionlessly. No panic in his face, no fear. Just a quiet, confident malevolence. Bernice thought of the master villains you read about in pulpzines, the ones who kept putting themselves in extraordinarily dangerous situations, as if they knew they wouldn't die, as if they knew the writers would keep resurrecting them, week after week, year after year.

And in that brief moment, she understood. She knew what !X had meant, felt it stabbing at her spine, lurching in her bowels, skulking in her nervous system.

The feeling she'd never be free. Even if she left him to die here, she'd never get away from him, never be rid of the casual horror staring up at her from the platform. Good grief, she hadn't even known him five minutes – where was she getting these ideas from? She just knew, like she'd known when she'd left Jason up on the glass plains of the moon; this isn't it, it's not over yet, let's not even bother pretending.

It doesn't end here, Professor Summerfield.

She considered throwing herself back to the ground. Staying here to snuff it when the MEPHISTO machine destroyed itself, so she could at least be sure he'd go down with her.

But she didn't, of course. She pulled herself into the belly of the dirigible as the disc continued its countdown.

100. 099. 098.

Fos!ca was running, again. She thought she'd lost her sense of direction, but her legs seemed to know where the bathosphere had crashed, so she let them get on with the job. Another impulse, equally mysterious, was stopping her running into any of the trees, even though there was no light in the jungle.

Primitive animistic thinking. The belief that individual parts of the body are self-willed. Another good example: something inside her had slowed her descent down the gravity cone, had insisted on returning to the bathosphere in

one piece, had demanded to be returned to the world, the People, her extended family group, and God.

Fos!ca was running, again. She was still running when the sky caught fire.

The dirigible floated towards the cathedral wall with agonizing slowness. In the Chamber of Meeting, beings who'd enjoyed total power over their environment for the last couple of eternities were rediscovering the ancient joys of biting their nails and grinding their teeth. The Angriest of the Eldest was swearing loudly, cursing Mother Lilith and threatening to beat her head in, if his retainers would only pick him up and carry him over.

The pulse had confused the dirigible, making the vehicle slow and unwieldy. The pilots were trying to guide it out of the cathedral, but they had no way of knowing if they'd reach the exit before the countdown ran out. Mother Lilith, meanwhile, had stopped caring what happened to her.

Whether she lived or died was immaterial. The Inner World had served its function.

'Nobody move!' shouted somebody with a gravelly voice and too much testosterone.

The humans. No doubt they'd be armed with stasis weapons by now. The Eldest of the Eldest shrugged to herself. It was a good feeling, one she hadn't enjoyed in decades. The dirigible shook, and black lines appeared across the redness outside.

'What's happening?' a female human voice whined.

'The wall is opening,' Mother Lilith explained, though she doubted anyone could hear her over the wailings of the Eldest. 'We're going back into normal space.'

'We're doomed,' cried a voice Mother Lilith recognized as the Youngest of the Eldest. 'MEPHISTO is dying. We are dying.'

'MEPHISTO isn't -' one of the other female humans began.

But there was no more time for words. The dirigible was pulled back into the interior of the Hollow Earth, with predictable consequences. The vessel started to scream.

The hallucinations began again. This time, Bernice was determined to keep her head together. She ignored the monsters snapping at her heels, the counterfeit Bernices who demanded she be tried for transmat abuse, the karate pigs on their cosmic mountain bikes. She cast them aside as trivial distractions.

Which was precisely the wrong thing to do, natch. The reason her mind was filling itself with trivial distractions was so it didn't have to deal with the stark horror of what was actually going on. The journey through the wall pulled Bernice's neurosystem into horrifying new shapes, linking her synapses with things that were never meant to be linked. Some of the 'things' belonged to other people.

Yes. That was it. She was experiencing fragments of the other passengers' psyches. Other people see the world so differently that even getting a whiff of their perceptions can be enough to push you over the edge, an old lecturer reminded her, the memory popping up like an icon on a palmtop. We communicate via words, but words conceal as much as they reveal, getting the point across but covering up the full horror. Without the words -

Without the words, Bernice felt the raw animal terror of the jungle, smelling mammoth pelts through the sensory software of Ash Juliandis. She remembered being tied to a rock, feeling the night wrap itself around her flesh. She didn't recall all the details: she couldn't have described the way the primitives had been dressed, or the expression on IX's face

she knew everything

as he'd ascended the gravity cone, but the impressions were there, right in the middle of her head. No, thought Ash, wait. Of course they were in her head, they were her memories. Where else would they be? Much more interesting was Lucretia's memory, the moment of horror as she'd been dragged across the belly of the other dirigible. The scent of yeti sweat in the air, the vessel breathing beneath her feet. She was being dragged on to the transmat platform, even

she was going to die

though I didn't want to go. Um. Lucretia was running through the jungle, thinking of a home that wasn't her home, a hollow sphere with a god and an extended family group. This didn't make sense, she realized. These were the thoughts of someone who wasn't on board the dirigible, someone whose nervous system was so sensitive and so alien that she'd become pail of the process, even at this distance, even though she was down there

what do I tell the Do[EO]C when I go back

in the jungle. Fos!ca could still see those eyes, looking at her from the bottom of the ladder, even though she'd never been there. This wasn't telepathy: it was part of a different kind of function. Something to do with MEPHISTO, something to do

she would never be free of him

with !X, but Bernice still didn't know how it was supposed to work. Ash knew something, she understood that now. Bernice tried to grasp the right strands of memory, but couldn't. She knew how Ash had felt on the sacrificial stone, and what the experience had done to her, but the answers...

She tried soiling the memories into a coherent order, into a story everybody could be part of. The experience hurt. Here in the heart of hallucination, the pain was almost physical. There were parts of the story she didn't like. Ugly little details. The truth about MEPHISTO was probably hidden in those details, but they were terrible and embarrassing, so she took the opportunity to rewire her synapses, changing the memories, erasing the nasty bits, filling in the gaps with whatever matter came to hand. She left some of her mental processes open, so she'd be able to keep rewriting the story even after the moment of contact ended.

If only she could get a little deeper into Ash's neural network, she might start to understand...

Tragically, it was at this point that the countdown clicked to 000 and the MEPHISTO machine exploded.

'THE END! (OR IS IT?)'

Mother Lilith was the last one to start screaming. Through the wall, she saw the sun light up, plumes of brilliant orange plasma streaming through the fissures in its surface. The light scorched the side of the dirigible, blasting her skin and burning out the nerves in her eyes. Mother Lilith's retainers, the strongest and most steadfast of the Tribe's elite guard, finally gave up on their sworn duty and dropped her. She felt her skull fracture as it hit the soggy floor.

They'd managed to get far enough away from the sun to avoid being disintegrated, but the blast had sent the vessel lurching out of control. If 'blast' was the word. It had been more like a shockwave of sick gravity, triggered by the detonation of the cathedral systems. There were backup systems dotted around the underworld, Mother Lilith knew, enough to keep the exterior of the planet stable, but the interior was shaking itself apart at the strata seams.

Outside, the yeti wired into the fabric of the dirigible were screaming through shredded lungs. Inside the Chamber, even the Angriest was sobbing, finally exhausted of fury. The Youngest was silent, quite possibly dead.

Still. It was the way things had to be.

The floor lurched under Bernice's feet, but this wasn't a problem, as her feet didn't know where they were anyway. Either her eyes were screwed tight shut, or she'd been blinded by the explosion. The dirigible was confused, she guessed, going into what might have passed for a crash-dive. There was enough gas in the thing to make the descent a slow one, but she didn't want to think what might happen if a bag of hydrogen this size hit the ground.

‘We have to get into the control section,’ she yelled, over the din of the Chamber. ‘Which way to the control section?’

‘Over here.’ The voice belonged to Ash. Bernice followed the sound, still wondering how Ash knew so much about this place. When Bernice had picked up on her memories, she’d seen how Ash had been put in touch with something, perhaps even the mind of MEPHISTO. But if MEPHISTO had been destroyed -

‘Ow,’ said Bernice. ‘What was that?’

‘Stay behind me,’ said Mr Misnomer, hovering on the other side of her eyelids. ‘Looks like we’re going to have another fight on our hands.’

Ash was the first to get her vision back. She stumbled through one of the hatchways, the passage outside reminding her of one of those virtual education programs where you got to explore the inside of a human body from a microbe’s point of view. Members of the Tribe of Lilith lay huddled on the floor, some staring into space, some literally tearing their hair out.

They’d all felt the death of the MEPHISTO machine. Ash had felt it too, but it was different for her. After all, the yeti weren’t supposed to get out of here alive.

At the end of the corridor was the control section. Given that it was really only a hollowed-out skull, it was pretty impressive: a cage of polished white bone and sticky pink flesh, the shrivelled brain of the lizard hanging from the ceiling in the centre of the chamber. The brain was a red walnut-shaped sac, making Ash think of an oversized punchbag. It was surrounded by the same blue-grey cables as had covered the machine in the cathedral, and numerous monitoring devices had been plugged into the neural canyons. The add-ons were essential to the dirigible’s survival, Ash reasoned. They replaced the organic matter that had been scooped out of the skull to make room for the passengers.

There were two yeti here. They’d probably been the pilots, but the shock of the explosion had reduced them to a mental

level somewhere between cheese and placenta. They lay sprawled across the floor, rolling in their own urine, surrounded by the short metal rods they used to prod the dirigible's brain.

Ash looked out through the vessel's glass eyes. The craft was dropping, but it stayed more or less level. Below, there were signs of seismic activity, the ground rippling and grumbling as the gravity went to pieces. The volcanoes were going into overdrive. There'd be quakes, up on the surface.

Ash stepped across the tongue of the lizard, which had been securely riveted to the floor, and headed straight for the brain. She wondered if she could pilot the thing. She was close enough to the process not to find anything here surprising, close enough to navigate the vessel without feeling out of place. But it wasn't as if she actually knew anything about yeti technology. No ideas or memories had been planted in her head, as such. There were just impressions. Instincts.

She scooped up one of the control rods. In colour, it was the same silver as the stasis guns, and its tip was giving off a constant heat. If she jabbed it into the brain, the dirigible would react, nervous breakdown or no nervous breakdown. The question was: where should she stick it first?

Mr Misnomer and Bernice stopped dead when they reached the control section. Ash was standing by the dirigible's brain, jamming a piece of metal into the frontal lobe. Mr Misnomer experienced the same kind of sick feeling you get when someone opens their mouth while chewing wheelks.

Ash glanced up at them. 'I'm going by instinct,' she said, sounding for all the world like a student giving an excuse for her essay being a week late.

Bernice pointed at one of the windows. 'Can you steer us to that side of the jungle? We want to get as close as we can to the crater where we came in.'

Mr Misnomer gave her one of his famous cynical looks.

'If we're going to crash, we might as well crash somewhere useful,' Bernice told him.

When Lucretia's vision returned, she found herself staring into the face of one of the Eldest. They were both on the floor, lying on their sides. Lucretia recognized the yeti as the young one who'd sounded so nervous when they'd hit the cathedral wall. She tried to ignore the stuff leaking from his head. His face was going all blurry, as if the features were made of plasticine and being mashed back into their original state.

'I understand,' he said. It sounded like last words. Lucretia rolled over, and ended up facing the transparent wall. She could see the jungle below, an outcrop of rock under an arsonist's sky, malted with spiky black trees. Up ahead, there was a gap in the foliage.

The dirigible was falling. Lucretia thought about that for a moment. The craft was, according to Kommander Katas

never be free of it

wait

the craft was, from what she'd been able to make out, full of gas. Wouldn't it explode on impact or something?

Lucretia didn't remember moving. But the next thing she knew, she was crawling towards one of the hatchways that led out of the chamber. On the other side of it was the area where she'd arrived. The area with the transmat.

All three of them were standing around the brain now, sticking control rods into the hypothalamus. Bernice was alarmed how easy it was to steer the craft. The phrase 'like riding a bike' sprang to mind - once you learnt, they said, you never forgot how - but she'd never learnt in the first place. Ash had said she was going by instinct, and Bernice knew exactly what she meant. Worryingly.

She looked up at the twin windows. She could see the crater, the gravity matrix linking the underworld to McClure's Atoll. It was a circle of sheer black, hundreds of metres across, and Bernice couldn't help but notice the way it was expanding, the trees around its rim shifting aside as it grew. Gravitational glitches, Bernice reckoned. The death of

MEPHISTO was doing horrible things to space-time down here.

‘We’re getting there,’ she told the others.

‘Great,’ snorted Mr Misnomer. ‘What now? We can’t take this ship into the crater. It’ll be compacted at the other end of the gravity funnel.’

‘We don’t have to take the ship through. We jump.’

‘And when we hit the ground?’ enquired Ash.

‘Ground? What ground? When we fall into the matrix, we’ll be sucked through and politely pushed back up to the surface. Trust me. Gravitic theory is a speciality of mine.’

‘Really?’

‘No. Right, we’re close enough. Let’s get to the exit.’

They all let go of the control rods.

Suddenly, the control section was upside down. The last thing Bernice felt before she left the floor was the tongue of the lizard flexing under her feet, trying to break free of its rivets. Everything shook. Even the air around them trembled.

The dirigible was going into spasm. Their attempts to control the craft had been effective, but clumsy; having had its brain cells mauled by the rods, the reptile was making the most of its sudden mental freedom. The creature wasn’t elegant enough to thrash with agony, but it was giving it a good go.

Bernice’s back cracked against the bone ceiling. As the dirigible turned again and she tumbled across the skull, there was a screech of pain from the lizard. Even from here, Bernice knew its body had scraped the treetops. She wondered if the vessel had been punctured.

Without warning, the dirigible righted itself again.

It had been sheer dumb luck, really. Mr Misnomer had kept hold of the control rod when the dirigible had turned, and when the vessel had twisted to the side, he’d fallen close enough to the brain to be able to stab the hypothalamus again. The lizard had fallen silent in a second, too shocked by the sudden neural intrusion to make another sound.

Nearby, Bernice and Ash picked themselves up off the floor, the latter crawling out from under the hairy forms of the two demented yeti pilots. Mr Misnomer concentrated on the view through the skull windows. He tried to steer the dirigible back towards the crater, but with only one person holding the rods, it was all he could do to keep the craft the right way up.

‘We must have damaged something,’ Bernice pointed out, with irritating obviousness. ‘We can’t take out the rods without sending the ship into spasm.’

She reached out for another of the fallen control elements. Mr Misnomer gave her a warning scowl.

‘I can get us to the edge of the crater,’ he said, before he even knew what the words on his tongue were.

‘What?’

Mr Misnomer clenched his teeth one last time. Yeah, it was a nervous habit, all right. But his next line had been a long time coming, so what the hell?

Self-sacrifice. It was a running theme, in most of his old adventures. Like the universe thought there was something noble about throwing yourself in front of the bullet. How many people had he met who’d proved their worth by volunteering to stay behind and hold off Doctor Harbinger’s robots, giving the rest of the party time to escape? How often had he said great things in their memory, but secretly thought to himself: What’s the point of proving your worth if you’re going to get yourself killed doing it? What kind of result was that?

And, yeah, Mr Misnomer had done it himself a couple of times, but there’d always been a cop-out. He’d stay behind to cover his companions’ backs, but in the end the robots would decide to take him alive and torture him at leisure. He’d put himself between the laser ray and the Queen of Xenophobia, but the ray would turn out to be set on ‘stun’. And the funniest thing was, he’d know, before even making those decisions, that it wouldn’t, couldn’t, end like that. He’d know there was a twist, somewhere in the tale.

No cop-outs this time. No more last-minute reprieves, and the Happy Endings shop was all out of *deus ex machinas* - excuse the Latin. Well, maybe this was a revisionist storyline, one of those postmodern jobs where the good guys suffered the same mortality rates as the bad guys.

So he said, with as much seriousness as he could manage without gagging, 'Someone's got to stay behind and pilot the ship.'

Bernice didn't seem to know what to say. Mr Misnomer hoped she wasn't trying not to snigger.

'He's right,' said Ash. 'There's no way we're going to get out of here if it keeps going mental on us.'

Bernice arched an eyebrow. 'You're sure?'

Mr Misnomer laughed. The first truly genuine laugh he'd had since he'd come to this bloody planet. 'I told you, didn't I? The character description's all I've got left. Ask your friend over there. This is part of the old Mr Misnomer aesthetic.'

'You *want* to die?'

'Bollocks do I want to die. I'm not doing this because I've got a martyr complex, Professor. I've just written myself into a corner. Understand?'

Bernice nodded.

'Good,' said Mr Misnomer. 'So vanish.'

Lucretia crawled across the floor, feeling the dampness under her hands and wondering if the dirigible was actually sweating. She'd already reached the central section of the ship's belly, where the lanterns had crashed to the floor during a loop-the-loop and were melting across the lizardskin like wax candles.

She felt cold metal under her hands, and kept crawling, hauling the rest of her body on to the transmat platform. Perhaps she could persuade the machine to reconstruct her in a happier, healthier form. Perhaps Lucretia Scannon Mk IV would have better luck getting off this planet.

She reached out for the control panel, set into the wall to her left. She felt the plastic buttons under her fingertips, wondered which of them would give her the best start in her

new life. It was like a computer game, she thought, giving you a choice of starting levels.

Ultimately, she decided to leave it to chance. She pulled back her fist, ready to punch the console.

Her hand stopped a centimetre away from the panel.

Lucretia looked up. Ash was standing over her. She'd gripped Lucretia's wrist, stopping her touching the controls.

'It's all right,' said Lucretia, weakly, I'm already dead.'

Ash shook her head, and smiled.

'We can escape,' protested Lucretia.

'We can escape anyway.' Ash leant over, put her arms around Lucretia's waist. 'Come on. We're going back to the surface.'

'But I want to die,' said Lucretia. I'm ready. Really, I'm ready.'

'Shhh,' said Ash.

Bernice knelt down by the edge of the hatchway. Actually, she fell over by the edge of the hatchway, but she called it kneeling. She looked out of the bottom of the dirigible, and saw the jungle below her, the trees thinning out near the lip of the crater. The skin ladder was gone, probably ripped off when the vessel had scraped the treetops.

Bernice looked back over her shoulder. Ash was coming, dragging Lucretia away from the transmat platform, the smaller and blonder of the two mumbling something that was entirely blotted out by the howling from the yeti-patchwork outside.

Ash caught Bernice's eye, and nodded. Bernice swung her legs over the edge of the hatchway.

'Geronimo,' she told the world in general, and dropped out of the craft.

For the first few seconds, she kept her eyes closed. The sensation of the air rushing past was bad enough. After that, things went a bit strange. There was no sense of falling, only the feeling of... hovering? Bernice opened her eyes, expecting to see the gravity matrix closing in around her.

She was disappointed. The crater was still a good few metres below her feet. To her left, she could see trees, looming on the crater's edge. Twisting her head, she could even see Ash and Lucretia hanging in the air behind her. The dirigible was passing overhead, moving across the crater, gradually losing height. The skin had indeed ruptured, Bernice noted, and gas was escaping from the glands in plumes of angry chemistry.

But that was hardly important now. Bernice was hanging in midair, and she had no idea why. She tried breathing in, but it was difficult, as if the oxygen had changed in some subtle way she couldn't quite get to grips with. She'd felt something similar in the Elysium system, in the early twenty-sixth century. It was a side effect of existing in a zero-g environment. Air molecules didn't behave the way you expected them to.

Zero-g. So, she was caught inside one of the gravity glitches. The rim of the crater was still shifting, the hole slowly growing, pushing space-time aside as it expanded. A major glitch, this one.

A horrible thought suddenly struck her. She craned her neck again, watched the dirigible cross the crater. Still dropping. When it reached the other side, it would hit the treetops there. The impact would tear the body open. If the gas inside was as volatile as the burning plumes suggested, there'd be an explosion, a fireball big enough to consume everything in the area. It'd probably level the jungle for hundreds of metres.

And if she was stuck here, hovering in the middle of a zero-g zone...

Mr Misnomer's teeth were still clenched. Now the sweat was dripping down his face, egged on by the heat, the tension and the effort. He wondered if he looked angry. He didn't feel angry, which was a novelty. He felt...

Grimly determined.

Hah.

His arms were burning, the tendons ready to snap at any moment. The bottom of the dirigible would hit the trees soon, so he spent what he judged to be his final few seconds trying to think of some decent last words. It was a stupid, pointless exercise, but after what he'd told Bernice about his character profile, he couldn't really go down without one climactic gasp of high drama. Yeah, he'd read the pulpzines, the fictionalized versions of his life that had been spread across Earthspace by the Melbourne Autolit Company. He knew the kind of thing the universe expected from him.

Last words. Something noble, something dignified, something that'd sum up the sheer raw strength of the human adventuring spirit.

Hmmm.

No, nothing came to mind.

'Arse,' he said, and funnily enough, saying it made him feel really happy. The trees loomed in front of the dirigible, ready to tear into the reptile's bloated gas glands.

Bernice felt the urge to flap her arms and legs like a mad thing, but knew it wouldn't do much good. There was an art to moving in null gravity. It was all to do with the way you shifted your weight, the way you dealt with the tension in your body.

She focused on the crater below, and concentrated, willing her muscles to make the right little twitches. She started floating downwards, but slowly. Too slowly.

There was a gigantic ripping sound. From here, you could hear the dirigible scream with a single voice.

Bernice flapped her arms and legs like a mad thing.

The effort was enough to push her into the embrace of the crater. As she felt her cells being tugged through the gravity matrix, she closed her eyes and crossed her fingers, noticing how her fingers suddenly seemed to be about two metres long.

There was an explosion. The matrix stretched the noise until it was lifetimes long, so it sounded as if the parallel universe next door had spontaneously combusted. Bernice

thought about Ash and Lucretia, wondered if they'd known enough about zero-g conditions to have made it to the crater before the blast.

Then she thought about Mr Misnomer. Time went crinkly at the edges.

The next thing she knew, there was water on her face. And, indeed, everywhere else. The gravity funnel had warped and expanded on the inside of the planet, she remembered, so it'd probably opened up a whole host of new fissures on the outside. She could have been anywhere on the surface of the planet.

She forced herself to stop breathing. The gravity matrix finally let go of her body, propelling her back into solid space and time. She tried swimming, but there was already some kind of current carrying her onward and upward, maybe something to do with the glitch, maybe something to do with the explosion.

All of a sudden, there were air molecules slapping her across the face. There was the sound of an engine, not far away. Vibrations in the water. A boat. People.

Bernice breathed again, and thought through all the important things she could tell the people when they got to her. For some reason, the first thing that popped into her head was the fate of Mr Misnomer.

REALITY

The office was still small and stuffy, the walls were still too dull to even bother being grey properly, and the icon of Chairman Manx still gazed lovingly down from the wall. The chunkputer was where Officer Quinton Pupp had left it, the cables trailing miserably across the desk in front of him.

The trouble was, everything felt different.

Pupp had already sent the footage of the final interview down to Bicknel, not even curious about who'd win the bet. Even Pupp had noticed the neat little quirks towards the end of the tale. He'd noticed, in particular, the way Summerfield had described being in direct mental contact with her companions, explaining how she'd been able to narrate parts of the story where she hadn't been present. And he'd noticed how Ash Juliandis had been left hovering in null gravity. As the station's log had already told him, the boots Juliandis wore were army surplus, designed for movement in zero-g conditions. She wouldn't have had any trouble making it into the crater before the explosion. Yes, it all tied in neatly enough.

Damn it. There he was again, treating the story as if it had any kind of credibility. Even apart from the gross stupidity of the Inner World idea, there were too many holes. The MEPHISTO thing had been fitted with a self-destruct unit, for Jodecai's sake, the most ridiculous cliché in the book. And then there was Kommander Katastrophen, who'd vanished from the narrative without a word of warning. Summerfield had simply forgotten he'd existed. The one time she'd almost mentioned him again, she'd ummed and ahed, trying to cover up the error.

Summerfield's lighter sat on the desk by the side of the chunkputer, the kind of cheap artefact you'd pick up in a bar somewhere, coaled in tacky mock-silver plating. The side of

the lighter was inscribed with the legend ST OSCAR'S DRINKING SOCIETY AWARD FOR SPECTACULARLY INEPT INEBRIATED BAR-FIGHTING. AWARDED TO PROFESSOR BERNICE SURPRISE SUMMERFIELD, NEW YEAR'S EVE 2593. According to the story, the lighter had belonged to Mr Misnomer. Another anomaly.

Pupp caught movement out of the corner of his eye, and turned to follow it. The office was darkening now, the environment systems simulating evening despite the total absence of class-three security hazards (or 'windows', as they were sometimes known) inside the building. In the gloom, Pupp's eyes met those of Chairman Manx.

There hadn't been any movement. He'd been expecting movement, that was all. Expecting the chairman's portrait to flicker and change. Ever since the last interview period, his eyes had been playing tricks on him, making him see the little homed demons of the Empire peering over the chairman's shoulders.

And there was that thought again, going round and round in his head. What if the story were true? It wasn't, of course it wasn't, but if it were... Suppose the world turned out to be hollow, suppose everything you'd believed about the universe since childhood turned out to be some hideous alien joke...

Pupp reactivated the chunkputer. File the interview record on the same dataslice as the arrest footage, he told himself. It'd keep his mind occupied, at least. Stop him fretting. Doubts were the enemy of the logical mind, that was the committee's line.

The screen lit up. Pupp knew the drill. In a moment, he'd see the welcome screen, the machine telling him to have a good evening in that nasty little Earthstandard voice it had -

'Integrity breached,' the machine said.

Pupp nearly choked.

'Unknown software has entered this system,' the machine went on, and started scrolling little pixie-letters across its display, a list of the files that had been 'breached'.

Pupp caught his breath. Scanned the list. Saw one name appear, again and again. Summerfield: arrest footage.

Summerfield: details taken at time of arrest. Summerfield: data downloaded from St Oscar's University database...

Oh God. It was happening. Whoever had brought the damned woman to Tyler's Folly, they were making their move, worming their way into the official systems, taking the planet apart from the inside. The Empire. The fleet, with its special agents and its warping submarines. The secret army Summerfield had been protecting. The aliens from seventeen galaxies away. Dear God, something was wrong, but the chunkputer wouldn't tell him what unless he asked, and he couldn't find the words any more, and he was sure the machine knew it, sure it was conspiring against him...

No. Stupid. Stupid. Chairman help me, I don't have the words, the only words I can think of are Summerfield's, the ones she used to describe MEPHISTO, the hurt and the sickness, so sharp it almost takes your breath away -

Movement. Pupp's eyes flicked across to the portrait of Manx again. The portrait shimmered, the face of the chairman fading away, collapsing into a haze of computerized drivel. It was over. The aliens were making their move, the chairman was dead, the submarines were here. A new face started to resolve itself out of the fuzz, and Pupp tried to stand, to meet the Devil face to face, but some part of him knew that if he so much as twitched, the whole world would fall apart around his ears.

The new face on the wall was bright yellow. It had dark eyes and a smiling mouth. The little red horns were the last thing to appear.

'Integrity breached,' the chunkputer repeated.

'It's true,' breathed Pupp. it's true. Oh, God.'

'God is dead,' said a voice. 'My fault. I'm speaking quite literally, of course.'

The shape stood on the other side of the desk, right behind the screen of the chunkputer. It had slipped into the office while Pupp had been staring at the portrait, moving so carefully and confidently that Pupp hadn't even noticed it. His station had been compromised. The systems had been breached. He should have been confused, surprised, angry.

He wasn't. All he experienced was the same sick feeling he'd had while he'd been listening to Summerfield's story, a story he was now ready to accept as completely and utterly true.

The thing on the other side of the desk moved again, so quickly that Pupp didn't see its hands until they were wrapped around his trachea. He felt pressure across his torso, and wasn't even curious to know what was going to happen next.

Professor Bernice Summerfield tried to keep her eyes closed, but they insisted on springing open every few seconds. Ironic, that. For the last... however long she'd been in this cell... she'd been trying to get to sleep, swearing at the security people whenever they banged on the door. Now they'd turned off the lights and were letting her rest, her body was nervous about shutting itself off, as if expecting something to jump out of the darkness at any moment.

But that was silly. After all, what could possibly be springing out of the darkness at her? She had nothing to worry about, gosh no. She was probably just expecting the guards to bang on the door again. Mmmm. That was it. Absolutely.

She knew they wouldn't, though. Not now they'd finished the interview. Funny, really. She'd told the officer, the bald one with the body shaped like one of the smaller-yet-nastier ape species, everything he'd wanted to know. He'd rewarded her with a jug of water and something that probably passed for food in these parts. Naturally, the man hadn't believed a word she'd said, but that was his problem.

They could use the mind probe, if they wanted. She'd given them the truth. The whole truth. Everything.

The two women are standing in the tunnel under McClure's Atoll, following the signs that have been scratched into the silicrete walls by person or persons unknown. Bernice explains grave-robber script to Ash, and Ash clicks her tongue. 'So, whoever left these marks behind was...?'

'...was versed in grave-robber script,' Bernice says, warningly. 'Don't assume any more than that. The script fell out of usage before I was born, though. I don't know it fluently. I only know this particular symbol because I've seen it used to mark the trail to the public toilets on Youkali.'

'What have public toilets got to do with archaeology?'

'Don't ask.'

They carry on down the passage, torches searing the walls, looking for more of the sigils. The expedition continues without incident, at least until they find the gravity matrix. The ground resolutely fails to shake. The roof of the cavern refuses to collapse. No tremor, no rockfall, no torpedo from the SSSSSSS submarine. They never get trapped, never need anyone to rescue them.

All that was just a plot device, wasn't it ?

She'd told the officer everything. Remember that, she said to herself, in her most insistent inner voice. You might have left out the odd detail, like the bit about the man-eating flytraps or the part where you stubbed your toe against a moschops, but you said everything you had to say. Everything important.

All about Mr Misnomer. The grumpy old hero who gave his life to save his friends. Yes. She had to remember that, more than anything else. He gave his life to save his friends.

The ape creatures are surrounding the camp on the mountain. Firelight flutters across scared Aryan faces, while silhouettes with dark eyes and greying hair hover at the edges of human perception. There's screaming, and the hissing of gas. Bernice watches Katastrophien drawing his old Luger from his belt. He turns it on one of the apes. Bernice sees the look on his face. A frown. Concentration? Distaste? Displeasure?

Bernice doesn't try to stop him. By now, there are apes all around them. The smell of simian pheromones is in the air, the scent that tells you, one evolved primate to another: this is someone else's territory. That blind and primal fear is in Bernice's blood, the atavistic terror of the tribe-next-door, an

animal urge woven into every human DNA stream. Intellectual caution no longer matters. Bernice feels metal at her feel. There's a gun, dropped by one of the SSSSSSS men, shiny and smooth and... and comforting, if we're going to be honest. She reaches out for it, like an apeman reaching out for a lump of rock, learning to use tools, inventing the first weapon.

The door opened, slowly and painfully, with the sound of squealing hinges. Bernice saw the light spill on to the antiseptic floor of the cell, but she was sick and she was tired and she was fed up, and frankly, the movement didn't mean much to her any more. Though her automatic sensory systems were on full alert, the parts of her brain designed to deal with conscious thought were elsewhere. On a mountain surrounded by yeti, to be precise, a world away and several days in the past.

Unfortunately, the figure at the threshold was an expert at slipping past automatic sensory systems. It was something to do with the way he moved.

And Bernice was busy imagining the Tribe of Lilith, their furry bodies hovering in the darkness, their faces leering out at her from the corners of the cell. Some were spattered with blood, a morbid touch her imagination absolutely insisted on.

A week ago. Lucretia has been kidnapped. Ash is hanging around Bernice's apartment at the university, telling her more about her neuroseismology thesis. She asks if Bernice remembers Mr Misnomer, an entirely fictional character from the 2530s, but Bernice doesn't, and says she's a little out of touch with trash culture. Ash gives her the works.

There's no rockfall in the cavern. Nobody comes to save them, and they certainly don't need a grappling-hook bolt-firer to reach the bottom of the atoll. At the camp, Bernice is opening fire, screaming along with the dying, trying to yell the phobia out of her system. In the light from the canned campfires, she sees the curious, intelligent faces of the yeti, just before the bullets pop their bodies open. Everything smells of cordite, and it's all her fault.

The officer is asking Bernice how much of her story is true. Bernice is telling him how Mr Misnomer opened fire on the yeti, how she did everything she could to stop him. Seconds ago, she's telling herself that she gave the officer the whole truth. She's an archaeologist, her life is dedicated to uncovering the truth, she's told her friends that a million times. And she still sticks little yellow notelets over her diary entries.

The figure crossed the floor without making a sound, moving towards the sleeping slab with steps so precise they hardly seemed to exist. Bernice could see his face now, a pale blur in the gloom of the cell. Half of her brain was stuck in the past, but the other half was starting to get a grip on the intruder's presence, starting to understand who he was and why he was here. And all she could think was: I was right, after all. I'll never, ever get rid of him.

'You've come back,' Bernice said.

'Yes,' replied !X.

She's on board the dirigible, being sucked through a hole in the world, her neurosystem reaching out for the minds of her companions. She sees the story from her own point of view, and from Ash's, and from Lucretia's, and from Fos!ca's, and from !X's. Bits of the story still hurt, so she removes them, knowing she'll have to keep editing and re-editing even after the experience is over. In her memory, she removes the gun from her hands, puts it into the hands of Mr Misnomer instead.

Mr Misnomer doesn't actually exist, but this isn't a problem. She slots him into her synapses, and finds he fits perfectly. She isn't naive enough to believe in a square-jawed action hero who can knock out killer robots with a single punch, mind you, which is why her version is old, cynical and self-obsessed, the worst parts of him sculpted out of old memories of Jason. The neural singularity of this moment is the perfect opportunity to rewrite history, the ultimate sticky yellow notelet. Earlier, in another version of the story, Lucretia is pointing out how alike Bernice and Mr Misnomer sound when they argue. Every adventurer needs a secret identity. Misnomer says, as he

lights a Happy Methuselah cigarette by the light of the canned campfires.

And in the real version? Bernice is still firing, panicking, killing. If this is the real version. Maybe it's just someone else's version. Maybe it's MEPHISTO's version.

'You died,' Bernice protested. 'You died inside the cathedral. We left you behind when MEPHISTO blew up.'

'No.'

No?

No. That was the storyteller talking. Bernice had known she'd never be free of him. She'd known it when she'd seen him sliding up the skin ladder behind her, when the dirigible had left the cathedral with him dangling in its wake. She'd felt !X's memories when her nerves had been scrambled, because he'd gone through the wall with her. They'd lost him somewhere over the jungle, probably when she and Ash and Katastrophen had been trying to steer the craft.

She'd written !X dead, in her mind. A way of dealing with his existence. So many of her adversaries died, it was easy to remember things that way.

Wait. What was that thought she'd just had? Something important had shot through her head, and she'd missed it.

Oh yes. Katastrophen.

Kommander Ernst Katastrophen of the SSSSSSS is tearing the machine apart, ripping his way through the access panels. The stupid SF robots are trying to break his neck, but they're too late. There's a self-destruct unit inside the MEPHISTO device. Katastrophen knows this, because he's met Kryptosa, and he knows he's part of the process. The self-destruct thing is downright ridiculous. Katastrophen must know he's ridiculous, too. A cartoon Nazi who's been taken for a ride. A victim of the stories, same as anyone else, looking for giants and supermen, finding nothing.

'Go,' Katastrophen says, later, in the skull section of the dirigible. His hands clutch the control rod, his fingers almost

bleeding with the effort of keeping the vessel stable. He's no Mr Misnomer. Bernice knows he can't keep this up for long.

Bernice enters the crater, hearing the dirigible explode behind her. Katastrophen dies in the blast, having given his life to save his friends...

But this version doesn't make sense, even if it happens to be true. Nazis don't sacrifice themselves to save others, and they don't have any friends. Bernice knows this for a fact. But what if they know there's nothing left for them to live for? No, not even then. Bernice was tortured by these people, lifetimes ago. They can't be treated like ordinary human beings. In her version of the story, even Katastrophen's pet doctor has to be given a ridiculous name and a ridiculous accent, turned into an arch villain to suit the stereotype.

So. Change the story. Mr Misnomer is with them, facing the MEPHISTO machine. Not Katastrophen. It's Misnomer who pilots the dirigible on its last voyage. It's Misnomer who sacrifices himself, an old hero going to his final resting place. Fascists know no redemption. Everybody knows that.

Yellow notelets.

'The MEPHISTO machine was a fraud,' !X explained. Bernice tried to concentrate on what he was saying, but it was so hard, with all the Nazis and explosions and double bluffs going on inside her head. 'Ash tried to explain it to you, but you couldn't understand. You weren't part of the process. You resisted it very well. Experience, I expect.'

Bernice shook her head. AH she really wanted was for the world to sod off and leave her alone. 'I don't understand.'

'The machine wasn't MEPHISTO. The machine was built by the Tribe of Lilith. The Eldest of the Tribe knew MEPHISTO was just an idea. A story. They created the cathedral, and constructed the machine as a homage to the idea. The computer was only a fetish. A totem. Self-destruction was part of its aesthetic. Part of the process.'

'A plot device,' Bernice heard herself murmur. 'Blowing up a church doesn't kill God. Then MEPHISTO doesn't really exist?'

‘MEPHISTO exists. But only as an idea. An aesthetic process. The story you were told in the cathedral was based on the same kind of imagery as the rest of the underworld, as Ash said. A false history to suit the environment. I’m sure you understand the principle.’

Inside her head, Bernice was screaming, watching the yeti hit the ground, all thrashing limbs and bloodstains. Katastrophen was giving his life to save them all. Mr Misnomer was opening fire on the cover of one of Ash’s pulpzines. On the outside, Bernice’s lips kept moving, asking the questions she knew she had to ask. ‘So who made the underworld? Whose idea was MEPHISTO? The truth. The truth, this time.’

!X had to think about that for a while.

‘I can’t tell you the truth,’ he finally declared. ‘I can only tell you MEPHISTO’s story. And then I can kill you. Is that good enough?’

'THE CURSE OF MEPHISTO!'

The rock beneath the pool had cracked, the strata shaken out of place by the system malfunctions. The pink goo seeped out through the gaps, stretched sticky tendrils up towards the surface of the underworld. Across the archescape, puddles of the material bubbled out of the ground, forming impromptu eyes that watched the collapsing Inner World with interest.

The jungle was burning, set alight by a crashed dirigible. Mammoths screamed in agony as the fire consumed them, but instead of simply dying they melted away into lumps of raw and shapeless biomass. The flames swept into the null-gravity areas, becoming weightless fireballs, floating across the planetary interior and occasionally exploding against the higher treetops. In areas further afield, cavemen found themselves able to fly, and new tribal hierarchies were established, those with the best aerial combat skills ceremonially murdering the old leaders. Everywhere, dirigibles moaned in terror and lumps of raw diamond fell from the skies. Frozen SSSSSSS soldiers gaped out of plastic icebergs as everything went fuzzy at the edges.

Birth pains. MEPHISTO had escaped its womb, leaving havoc in its wake. This wasn't Armageddon, it was afterbirth.

In the middle of the pool, the consciousness of F. Nils Kryptosa congealed into a single solid(ish) mind. The *meister* slopped together a few limbs and stood upright.

'The end of the world as we know it,' he sighed. 'Pity there's no cameras. You could win awards, with this kind of material. Oh yes.'

He toyed with the thought for a moment. No cameras, maybe, but he still had a few minutes left...

Smiling to himself, Meister Kryptosa of New Heidelberg began to mentally assemble his final shooting script.

Scene: the desert. A harsh, lifeless wilderness. Any desert will do. One on Chi Caprisis would be good - it's got two suns. (NB: Always good to start a new series in a harsh, lifeless wilderness. Gets the audience in the mood.)

Kryptosa walks into shot. He addresses the audience without facing the camera. Makes him look aloof and all-knowing.

'Over a century ago, I made a series entitled *In Search of Ancient Mu*,' he says, the old presenter's patter coming back to him at last. 'In it, I explored some of the more esoteric myths mankind has stumbled across during its voyage to the stars. I investigated the waterworlds of Ignatz's Passage, where, rumour has it, the people of Lost Atlantis found shelter after the destruction of their city. I travelled to planets like Yemaya and Vo'lach Prime, the graveyards of extinct alien races said to have visited and influenced the human race millions of years BCE. I even visited a dead world at the centre of the galaxy, which legends claim was the birthplace of the very first humanoid civilization.'

He stops walking, turns to camera.

'Tonight, we're going to find out about yet another ancient alien race, a species no other serious researcher has ever investigated. I think you'll agree, these particular xenomorphs don't have much in common with your common-or-garden age-old superbeings.' Pause for a wry smile. 'So old is this race, in fact, it doesn't even have a name, at least not one we might understand. Yet the legacy of these beings affects each and every one of us. For want of a better name, we'll call them the People.'

New image: space. Impressive starfield effects, overlaid with the title sequence. Caption appears: THE CURSE OF MEPHISTO.

We hear Kryptosa's voice echoing across the void, in my travels across the galaxy, I've found that humanoids

everywhere draw a strange line between what they call “natural” and what they call “artificial”. If an advanced ape picks up a stick and uses it as a weapon, that’s a “natural” tool. But if he develops his weapon, reshapes and redesigns it until it becomes an auto-sighted staser pistol, then that’s an “artificial” tool. If we’re going to understand the People properly, we have to leave behind these arbitrary terms.’

Kryptosa steps out of the starfield, and walks towards the camera; standard FX shot.

‘We don’t know who the People really were, or what their intentions might have been. But the impact they had on the universe was so great, it’s impossible to think of them as anything other than a force of nature. Who can say which of creation’s wonders were there from the start, and which were invented by the People?’

(This bit might need cutting ever so slightly. Get the script editor on it, ASAP.)

‘You see, the People didn’t bother with science, not as we understand it. They didn’t develop genetic engineering, or warp technology, or high-powered energy weapons. They specialized in culture, not in matter. They created ideas. They devised mythologies, sculpted archetypes.

‘They were the ones who told the first story of the Inner World. Perhaps they only meant the story as a metaphor. But even the metaphors of the People were - and are - powerful enough to reshape reality.’

We cut to a mysterious landscape, unfamiliar to the viewer. We see mountains, rivers, plains, etc.; but everything here has an undefined quality, as if we’re seeing it out of the corners of our eyes all the time. (NB: The virtual reconstruction team are going to have to do a really smart job on the scenery.) We pan across our strange new world, eventually finding Kryptosa walking through an unformed jungle.

‘The People seeded the universe with ideas, and their stories took root in worlds across creation. Cultural embryos, left sleeping beneath the skins of planets galaxies apart,

affecting the psyches of any life forms developing on those worlds. One particularly powerful archetype was what we mere mortals might call “Dystopia”. A nightmare world of dysfunctional people and dysfunctional ideals, almost literally a living Hell. Not very subtle, perhaps, but the People did tend to see things in black and white.’

(NB: This last bit is speculation. Get graphics to run up some psychopredictive diagrams to make it look convincing.)

‘The Dystopian idea proliferated across the galaxies, and grew inside the wombs of any number of worlds. Even on planets where the archetype didn’t take root properly - yes, including Earth - the locals still became unconsciously aware of it, and were fascinated by the latent imagery buried in the substrata.’

For the first time, Kryptosa notices his surroundings. The jungle around him looks a little more solid than it did a minute ago. ‘This is Tyler’s Folly,’ he explains. “The only planet left in Earth’s galaxy where the Dystopian archetype is still alive and kicking. Maybe the only planet in the universe. The entire physical interior of the world has been changed, as you can see. Millions of years ago, the archetype got its claws into the place, and never let go. Welcome to the Jung-le.’

Good psychological gag. Maybe a bit subtle for the audience? Will they know Jung? Probably not. Might cut that out.

‘But there was a problem. You see, archetypes only work if there are people around to understand them, and as it happened, intelligent life never evolved on the surface of Tyler’s Folly. So the Inner World lay dormant, half formed, for aeons.

‘Then, about a hundred years ago... *I* arrived.’

Montage shot. Scenes from around the Inner World. We see the landscape, now fully developed. Lakes, rock formations, canyons. The life forms, which until now looked a lot like lumps of clay, grow proper faces. We see cavemen and yeti. The larger lumps become dinosaurs. Can we buy some of

that old dinosaur footage from the ILM Regene Company? They give good stegosaur.

Kryptosa, in voice-over: 'When I became the first human being to enter the underworld of Tyler's Folly, the archetype latched on to me. Ideals of human culture were taken out of my head and introduced to the landscape. Or, as I like to call it, the archescape. Ape people, volcanoes, prehistoric monsters... all the things the old autolits told us were at the centre of the Earth. There was even a bit of old religious orthodoxy thrown in, just for a laugh.'

Cut to the pool, in a cavern beneath the yeti settlement. Kryptosa stands in the pool. (NB: This is a 'real' Kryptosa, not one made out of pink goo. We don't want to get the Colonial Viewers and Listeners Association pissed off again.)

'And as for me, the yeti made me part of this place. I've heard it called the Pool of Life, which is as good a name as any. It's a puddle of genetic material, with yours truly as a kind of control component. The yeti made it as a defence, I understand that now. From me, they found out that the human race would be coming to the planet, sooner or later. So they thought they'd disguise it a little.

'Using my memories, they made the exterior of Tyler's Folly look like any other MG-type world. They installed systems to give the surface a normal gravitational field, hiding the stranger gravity in the middle. The pool pumped genetic material up to the surface, filling the seas with ordinary fish and sea mammals. Really, it would have been better if they'd made the planet look a little less hospitable. Then perhaps it wouldn't have been colonized. But they were using my memories as a template, so I suppose it's not surprising that the Folly ended up having so much in common with Ordifica. That's where I was born, you see. It's a waterworld, too.'

Kryptosa pauses. The idea is to make the audience think he's remembering his homeworld. Good sentimental moment. Gives the piece a human dimension.

'That's the big joke,' Kryptosa muses. 'Anyone would think the underworld was artificial. They'd think the gravity

systems were used to make the Inner World. Not true. The Inner World is “natural”, at least as far as anything invented by the People can be “natural”. It’s the surface world that’s the fake.’

Back to the underworld. Majesde panning shots of the prehistoric environment. Sodding ugly, but majestic.

‘There’s one more thing to be explained,’ the voice-over concludes. ‘The nature of the archetype. I’ve called it “Dystopia”, but that’s a simplification. Besides, the archetype has a name.

‘This place isn’t evil. Even the People knew better to deal in abstracts like “good” and “evil”. It’s merely *wrong*. The archetype is ugliness, anxiety, horror. It plays on the neuroses and the phobias of those who visit it. When I arrived, even before the underworld had a proper shape, I was appalled. Everything I thought I’d known about the universe stopped making sense. I blotted most of that time out of my memory, and it’s only coming back to me now, with the end being so close. The physical shell of die Inner World is a womb, nothing more. The archetype doesn’t need physical form. It exists as that lurking sense of unease, the feeling of something being terribly, terribly wrong somewhere.

‘I don’t know what happened to the People, but I do know this. There’s another kind of Inner World somewhere out there, in another galaxy. I wouldn’t like to say whether the inhabitants of that place are actual descendants of the People, or simply following in their footsteps, but they call themselves the People, as well. The intelligence controlling this world we’ll call it “God”, everybody else does – makes sure everyone there can live in peace, but even God understands why the underworld has to exist. Without the ugliness, the People will always be incomplete. God knows that. Perhaps that’s why !X was allowed to come into being. It’s certainly why he was allowed to visit Tyler’s Folly. An emissary from an alien culture that desperately needs to get in touch with something darker, something more dangerous.

'IX is part of the process. Part of the archetype. The archetype has a name, and the name means the same thing to everyone, regardless of their species or culture. After all, it *was* designed to be universal.

'The name, as you may already have guessed, is MEPHISTO.'

Return to the Pool of Life. Kryptosa still stands in the centre of the pool, but there are cracks in the walls and the cavern is shaking. The audience should get the impression it could collapse at any moment.

'Now it's over,' Kryptosa tells us. 'MEPHISTO has left the womb, has gone to continue the process elsewhere. I don't know how, exactly. I'm part of the process myself, enough to understand the story at last, but I don't pretend to have all the answers. But I know this much: wherever there's peace and harmony, MEPHISTO will be waiting in the wings, ready to introduce a little suffering and paranoia. Perhaps that's not a bad thing. Perhaps we need a small dose of pain and fear in our lives to make us human. Even if we think we only want peace and quiet, we're secretly searching for the bad things in life, because we know they mean as much to us as the good things.'

He pauses in contemplation. A huge crack appears in the roof of the cavern. We want a big sound effect here, something nice and menacing.

'The curse of MEPHISTO,' Kryptosa concludes. 'Mankind Expects Pain, However It Seems To Outsiders.'

The roof collapses.

Fade to black.

'REALITY!'

A crack of light. The sound of hinges that quite deliberately and maliciously hadn't been oiled for several decades.

On the sleeping slab of cell number 12, Ash reacted to the opening of the door before her higher thought processes had even figured out what was going on. She swung her legs over the edge of the slab, tried to judge whether the prickling in her arms and legs would let her get up. She might have regained consciousness, but she doubted she'd be able to feel any pain. Still, that was probably a good thing, under the circumstances.

A silhouette appeared in the doorway. Even before the environment systems noticed the movement and switched on the cell lights, Ash had recognized the intruder's body language.

'Hi,' said Lucretia. Flatly.

'Hi,' said Ash. Flatly.

Lucretia looked suitably deceased. Her T-shirt and corduroy action pants weren't exactly in tatters, but the clothes bore the marks of fire, flood, and monster-damage, giving them a worn-in look even the most fashionable art student would have been proud of. Even her dufflecoat looked threadbare, as if no longer capable of holding back all the horrors of the world. There was an embarrassed silence while the two of them eyed each other up. Normal human protocol really didn't cover this kind of situation, really.

'So, what's happening?' Ash tried.

'I think we're escaping,' Lucretia told her. 'There's no one around. This whole level of the station's gone quiet. We found some of the security people, and they were all... um, they weren't exactly active, yeah?'

‘Who’s “we”?’

A second figure appeared in the doorway. Huge brown eyes peered over Lucretia’s shoulder, nervously checking the cell for traps or hidden sociopaths.

‘Hello,’ said Fos!ca. She was holding a bunch of keys, identical to the ones carried by the security men.

‘You came to rescue us?’ Ash asked.

Fos!ca looked vaguely ashamed. ‘Not exactly. I followed !X.’

‘!X...?’ God, it was hard making that sound like a question.

‘Yes. I’m sorry. He left the underworld the same way you did. I found the bathosphere before the jungle started burning, but I lost track of him, for a while. I know he broke into the local information system. It’s very primitive. I used the bathosphere systems to trace him here. Getting into the building wasn’t hard.’

‘The guards are all dead?’

‘Not dead,’ said Fos!ca. ‘Ugly.’

‘We have to get to Bernice,’ Lucretia pointed out, in her best hurry-up-I-need-to-wee voice.

‘She’s in cell 13,’ Fos!ca told Ash. ‘I looked through this station’s log when I arrived.’

Ash headed for the door. ‘Right. Let’s get her out before !X finds her.’

Fos!ca looked apologetic. ‘I think it’s probably too late for that. I already tried. The door to cell 13 won’t open.’

Bernice was sitting upright, having managed to get her limbs under control at last. !X had closed the cell door before he’d told her MEPHISTO’s side of the story, and she’d heard him fumbling in the dark, probably doing something to the lock. Did that mean he’d left people alive and kicking somewhere in the station, people he didn’t want interrupting him? Make a note of that for later, Summerfield.

‘You mean God sent you here?’ she asked him, more to keep him talking than anything else.

‘Not “sent”. God *allowed* me to come here. God *allowed* the process to continue. It can’t have been difficult, convincing the Do[EO]C to let me out of Paradise. The Department

knows so little about sociopathy. Its agents only have barbarian fiction to learn from. It never occurred to them that setting me free on an alien planet was in any way a strange thing to do.'

Typical People, thought Bernice. Everything was a leisure activity. To them, letting !X go was like watching *It's a Knockout* for serial killers. 'But why now? You said MEPHISTO had been around for millions of years.'

'God has reasons, I expect. Psychologically, the People are still suffering the aftershock of the War. An ideal opportunity for the introduction of the archetype, possibly. Also, with the recent earthquakes and monster sightings on this planet, God can justifiably claim my visit was either therapy or scientific research. Though of course, the earthquakes were only a sign that MEPHISTO was ready to leave the womb. The MEPHISTO machine was beginning to malfunction. Creating errors in the gravitational systems. All part of the process.'

'But when we destroyed the MEPHISTO machine

'You didn't destroy it. You triggered its destruction. Because of that, Tyler's Folly will be relatively stable, in the future. Once the birth pains are over.'

Bernice shrugged. 'Well, at least I've achieved something. Or was that part of the "process", too?'

'The welfare of the planet is irrelevant,' !X said, off-handedly. 'The only important thing is the continuation of the process. That's why I'm here. Professor Summerfield.'

He was lifting an arm, pulling something out of a belt Bernice hadn't previously noticed. Hard to make out what the object was, though. The cell was still dark; whenever one of the security men had come in, the lights had switched themselves on automatically, but !X's movements weren't even being picked up by the environment scanning systems.

Bernice shifted uncomfortably on the sleeping slab. 'And what, precisely, are you here to do?'

'To kill you,' !X replied. 'As promised.'

Fos!ca tried the lock again. The tumblers turned, but the door of cell 13 didn't open, not like the doors of 11 and 12 had.

She thought of the drama-documentaries she'd studied back on the worldsphere, gathered from barbarian cultures across the universe. Barbarians treated what they called 'slasher movies' as entertainment, but to the Do[EO]C, they were important personological texts. This, Fos!ca realized, was what they called a 'cliffhanger' moment. Ash's companion was on the other side of the door, her life threatened by one of the Truly Crazyed. It was Fos!ca's sworn duty to save her.

That was what had brought her back to Tyler's Folly, wasn't it? Duty. She hadn't told Ash that part of her story, how she'd orbited the planet for almost a day after she'd left the underworld, wanting to run back to God but not being able to break free of the planet's emotional gravity. (Emotional gravity. Interesting physico-personological theory. File for later reference.)

She couldn't go back home without !X. The Do[EO]C was the only Interest Group in the worldsphere that still liked to talk about 'duty', the only group that made its members swear an oath of allegiance, the only group that you actually *belonged* to rather than had an *interest* in. If she broke the trust, left !X behind...

Losing yourself was worse than dying, thought Fos!ca. You weren't taught things like that, where she came from.

'What kind of hardware is !X packing?' asked Ash. Her voice was urgent, but calm. Fos!ca suspected it had something to do with drugs.

'He didn't have any equipment when we arrived on this planet,' Fos!ca said. Then she paused. 'But the primitives...'

'The stasis gun,' said Ash, gritting her teeth.

Fos!ca shook her head. 'It doesn't make any difference. If he wants to hurt your colleague, he doesn't need a weapon.'

'That's not the point. Those guns have got a heat-beam setting, right? That's why we can't get in. !X has gone and welded the door shut.' Even before she'd finished speaking,

Ash had started to move, scurrying away up the corridor but not really looking like she knew where she was going. 'This is a security station,' she called back, as she vanished through an open doorway at the end of the corridor. 'They should have some heavy-duty weaponry around here somewhere. We can blast the cell open.'

Fos!ca and Lucretia watched her go. There was a moment's silence.

'We're not going to be in time to save her. are we?' said Lucretia.

'Um,' said Fos!ca.

!X held the weapon steady in front of Bernice's face, the tip hovering centimetres from the skin of her cheek. She tried to make eye contact with him, the way you were supposed to when you were facing off an arch villain, but !X wasn't interested. He looked down at the handle of the stasis gun, his fingers sliding across the surface of the metal, adjusting the triggering mechanism.

'I still don't understand," Bernice said, hurriedly. 'How exactly did God -'

'No more explanations,' said !X, sharply. 'I described this weapon as a toy. The product of a technologically obsessive culture. It can turn air molecules into cellular inhibitors, to put a biological target into stasis. A small burst can subdue a life form without any long-term effects. The weapon can also generate intense heat, either as a beam or a single point.'

In front of Bernice's eyes, the sharp end of the weapon began to glow. Not red-hot, blue-hot, or even white-hot, but a colour that did funny things to the shape of the air around it. Now that, thought Bernice, is hot. Bugger.

'The weapon is quite precise,' !X continued. 'Capable of burning away the facial tissues without causing terminal damage. I've already tested it on some of the staff at this station. The chief of security, I'm particularly pleased with.'

'You're sick,' said Bernice. She wondered if she could get the weapon out of his grip, if she was fast enough. Oh, yes,

that seemed likely. He moved like a greased anaconda, and she was a bumbling sack of flesh that hadn't slept for days.

'Only wilfully. Please. Let me finish. I've taken the stasis and stun settings off line. The weapon is now primed to kill, and only to kill. By way of demonstration.' For the briefest of moments, a look of deep contemplation crossed !X's face. Bernice thought he'd never looked so human, it occurs to me that most of what I do is by way of demonstration. But still.'

Bernice tore her eyes away from his face, concentrated on the tip of the weapon. A single point of light, sharp enough to make droplets of sympathetic sweat break out across her forehead. There was liquid in the corners of her eyes, and it felt like condensation rather than tears.

He was going to kill her.

It wasn't even worth fighting him. He was stronger, yes, he was faster, yes, but, more importantly, he had an advantage she couldn't ever match. No principles. None of the little behaviour protocols of humanity, the quirks and foibles you stick with even in the middle of a crisis, even when you know you're going to snuff it. The point of light came closer, close enough for her to feel the scorched air against her cheeks. Slowly, though. Moving slowly. The sod, he wouldn't even kill her quickly. That was typical of him, wasn't it? He hurt people, and scared people, and that was all he ever did...

Wait.

Wait wait wait. He hurt people, and scared people, and that was all he ever did. He'd killed in the underworld, but only to make a point. What did he mean, 'by way of demonstration'? Who was he demonstrating to, by killing her?

Oh God. Goddess. Whatever. Bernice felt it bubbling up in her gut, the wrongness, the ugliness, the curse of MEPHISTO. !X didn't want to kill her. He wanted her to fight. Expected her to fight. You could see it, the way his muscles were arranged: there was no tension in his body, no tension at all. He was relaxed. Deliberately vulnerable.

She could reach out and take the weapon. He wouldn't stop her. She knew that, because at last, at long last, she understood the way the process worked.

She remembered sitting on the side of the mountain, writing her diary. Telling the pages how the Inner World was full of predator-prey struggles. Kill-or-be-killed situations. Archetypal conflicts. That was what this was. Like the People who'd thought up the underworld, !X saw everything in black and white, not so much kill-or-be-killed as ugly-or-make-ugly. This time, he was using lethal force, but the principle was the same. Do or die. Hammer or anvil. All she had to do was reach out and take the weapon, turn it on him. She pictured his face, melting away, turning to wax and revealing whatever nerves he had underneath. She'd be spreading the ugliness, just like he'd spread the ugliness. She'd become part of the process, too.

She could take the weapon.

If she didn't, and only if she didn't, then !X would kill her.

The camp. Opening fire on the yeti. Even back then, the process had been getting its claws into her. The environment of the underworld, the mind of MEPHISTO, had filled up her senses with shadows and pheromones, urging her on, willing her to slaughter the Tribe. That had been the first step on the road, and the road led here, to this final face-off. He wasn't threatening her: he was initiating her.

Take the weapon. Live. Kill !X. Be MEPHISTO's, become the agent who went on spreading the process across Earthspace.

Don't move. Die. Spend your last moments wondering if it was really you opening fire, or some ancient archetypal force messing around with your neuroses.

The water dripped down Bernice's cheeks, evaporating in the heat from the tip of the weapon. Her eyes were suddenly clear, and she looked up again, seeing !X's face hovering over her. He didn't speak, but that ridiculous cartoon face was saying it all. Whatever she did, he wouldn't stop her. Whatever move she made, he'd just stand there, letting it happen.

By way of demonstration.

Kill him. Be MEPHISTO's.

Don't kill him. Die.

Bernice reached out for the weapon, wrapped her fingers around the shaft. The metal was cold, not conducting any of the heat from the tip. She prized it out of !X's grip, and felt the muscles go slack in his hands.

Whatever she did, he wouldn't stop her.

Lucretia was holding her breath. It was a human thing, like crossing your fingers. If you didn't breathe, you weren't even letting the air from your lungs get in the way of the action. All those little butterfly-effect consequences that could happen if you breathed the wrong way suddenly stopped being a problem. The world was safe, as long as you held your breath.

Neurotic thinking.

The door of cell 13 was giving way. Ash had returned to the corridor dragging an awkward mass of black metal and plastic tubing, a cross between a plasma rifle and an oxyacetylene torch. Ash had found it in a locker, in a room down the corridor, which had presumably been the station's armoury, and had identified the weapon as ,a molecular stumbler. The kind of thing the marine corps used to make holes in walls during embassy sieges and suchlike. She and Fos!ca had turned the nozzle of the machine on the cell door, and the door had turned a brilliant white as the stumbler had pulled its molecular strands apart, a process Fos!ca had explained in terms so obscure they probably wouldn't even have made it into the *Oxford Dictionary of Technobabble*.

Finally, Ash took her foot off the machine's activation pedal. A neat hole had opened up in the door, but it was no wider than Lucretia's head, not big enough for any of them to squeeze through.

'Bernice?' Ash shouted. Lucretia heard the word echo around the cell. There was no answer, though.

Fos!ca ran her hand around the rim of the hole. 'The structure -'

'I know,' said Ash. She took a few steps back, and hurled herself at the door.

As soon as she hit it, it *unravelled*. The metal around the hole came apart, disintegrating into a tangle of wiry threads. After a few moments, the doorframe was empty, the floor around it covered in strands of baffled molecules.

The three of them peered into the darkness. Lucretia saw a figure, sitting on the sleeping slab by the far wall, not moving. Its face was pale, a big white blur in the gloom.

Ash stepped through the door. Fos!ca followed her. Lucretia brought up the rear.

The lights of the cell switched themselves on as soon as they crossed the threshold. Fos!ca's eyes rearranged themselves accordingly. The cell was much the same as the other two she'd seen. The atmosphere was oppressive, the result of several unpleasant artificial scents that Fos!ca's nasal antibodies had trouble getting rid of. Designed to make human prisoners uncomfortable, she guessed.

There were two figures in the room. This, in itself, was not surprising. However, everything else was.

The woman Fos!ca instinctively recognized as Professor Bernice Summerfield sat on the slab, her back resting against the wall. Her legs were folded up in front of her, her arms wrapped around her knees. Her face was pale and expressionless. Her eyes flickered over Ash and Fos!ca as they entered, but without much feeling. She looked tired, maybe irritated.

!X was lying on the floor in front of the slab. He was on his back, his body rigid. The muscles in his arms and legs were taut. Fos!ca imagined you'd need a molecular stumbler just to bend the joints.

'You're late,' said Bernice.

Lucretia stumbled into the room, ran into Fos!ca's back, and mumbled a quick 'sorry'.

'Late for what?' asked Ash.

'The big finish,' Bernice told her, nodding towards !X. Fos!ca stepped forward, but carefully. She wasn't sure why. She had the funny feeling Bernice might suddenly get up and tear her throat out, though that was silly, as the woman

wasn't supposed to be one of the Truly Crazyed. Fos!ca bent down over !X's body, examining his face.

He looked like he was in agony. His mouth was clamped shut, but Fos!ca could tell his teeth were clenched. His eyes were open wide, two small black spheres popping out of his skull. There was more than a hint of surprise on those features.

Ash looked down at Fos!ca. Fos!ca looked up and shrugged. 'He's alive,' she said.

A smile crept across Bernice's face. 'That's the thing about archetypes,' she said. 'No subtlety. No flexibility. It's either kill or be killed, Utopia or Dystopia, do this or do that. Personally, I don't want to do either.'

Fos!ca looked from Bernice's face to !X's. 'I don't understand. We thought !X was armed. We thought he had a stasis gun.'

'He was. He did.'

Fos!ca looked around the cell. There was no sign of any weapon. 'Then what did you do with it?' she asked.

Bernice pulled herself to her feet, though she hadn't used her legs in a while, judging by the way she moved. Then she glanced down at the rigid form of !X, unable to move from the shock of what had happened to him, the look of surprise, pain and horror still frozen on to his face.

'What do you *think* I did with it?' she said.

EPILOGUE

THE WORLDSHERE, AND OTHER WONDERFUL PLACES

Fos!ca tried not to look up, but the laws of aesthetics were against her. The statue was there to be stared at. Well, obviously. All statues are there to be stared at, especially those that just happen to be twenty-four kilometres high and sculpted out of cold-fused mercury.

Fos!ca surrendered to art, and raised her head.

Here in the real world, the eRup colossus was easier to face than in Paradise, but the sight still made Fos!ca ill. The clouds drifted around the statue's shoulders, smearing the face across the sky. A noble face, almost smug, all huge eyes and chiselled cheekbones. Somehow, it looked wrong. Fos!ca realized she'd been expecting to see the mutilated version, where eRup's features had been replaced by the facial icon of !X/MEPHISTO.

The bathosphere was parked on the dry grass not far from the giant's left foot, listing slightly to one side. !X was still on board, pinned to the floor of the control section with restraining fields, though he hadn't moved a muscle since they'd left Tyler's Folly. Perhaps, Fos!ca reflected, there were some muscles he didn't want to risk moving. Not after what Bernice had done with the stasis gun.

She took a deep breath. 'God,' she said.

There was a pause before the answer came.

'I see you've been busy,' said the voice of God, using one of Fos!ca's many subdermal implants as a mouthpiece, 'I had a peek inside the bathosphere. !X isn't saying much, I see. Do you think we should leave the "item" there, or should we get a medic to take a look? The Strange and Painful Biological Problems Interest Group would love to see this.'

'You knew about MEPHISTO,' Fos!ca said.

There was a moment's silence. God could reputedly detect every thought in your head in under a second – though politeness usually prevented this – so Fos!ca assumed the pause was for dramatic effect. 'Who, me?' God finally replied.

'You sent !X to Tyler's Folly to set MEPHISTO loose. You had it all planned from the beginning.'

'In case you've forgotten, we have a treaty with a certain well-known species in that galaxy which says we can't interfere in events there. If I'd planned everything, it'd be a treaty violation.' God sounded almost amused by the idea.

Fos!ca reached into the pocket of her symbiotic suit. The pocket hadn't originally been there, the suit having grown it specially when Ash had given her the book. 'Kryptosa's journal,' she said as she removed it. 'But according to Lucretia, Kryptosa never kept a written record. Somebody faked this journal, and left it where they knew it'd find its way to Professor Summerfield. And somebody told the SSSSSSS the location of the Inner World. I visited the university on Dellah before I came back. Ash showed me her thesis on autolit fiction. It's very strange. The villains in the pulpzines are just like the soldiers Ash and her friends met in the underworld. Almost as if someone had chosen them. Almost as if someone had thought they'd make ideal opponents.'

'I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about,' said God. 'Who are these SSSSSSS people, anyway?'

'Somebody arranged all this,' Fos!ca continued. 'They even filled in the entrance to the underworld at McClure's Atoll, the one Kryptosa found, and left clues in... I think it's called "grave-robber script". I wouldn't be surprised if the man who sold Lucretia the journal was a TBIIG agent.'

'One problem,' God pointed out. 'If I had the physical influence to leave little clues on the atoll, why would I need to send !X to the planet to set MEPHISTO free? Why would I even need to involve this Bernice person, about whom I claim to know nothing, in spite of blatant evidence to the contrary?'

Fos!ca knew the answer. She knew that God knew that she knew the answer; they were going through the motions of an argument, that was all. 'Because MEPHISTO is an idea. An aesthetic. So the archetype needed the right aesthetic conditions to be set free. The process required an adventure, like one of the stories Kryptosa used to give the underworld a proper shape. Somebody had to journey to the centre of the world and destroy the machine. Bernice had to be part of the process. So did !X. You only got the SSSSSSS involved as a plot device, to spur Bernice and Ash into taking the journal seriously.'

'You *are* smart,' said God. 'You know, I think you're too good for the Do[EO]C. Don't tell them I said that.'

Fos!ca took another deep breath. She was ready to play her trump card, to bring up the one thing she hadn't mentioned in front of the professor. 'Bernice visited the worldsphere, a while ago. And now she's living a few light years away from the one planet where MEPHISTO was still in existence.'

God went *harrumph*.

'You put the idea into her head, didn't you? Or into the head of one of her travelling companions. You're the reason she decided to settle on Dellah in the first place. Bernice told me how the TBIIG had recruited her as an agent, but I think it's a distraction, so she won't notice what you're really doing.'

'Cynical, aren't you?' said God. 'Believe me, I've got people closer to her than the TBIIG. Oops, what a giveaway.'

Fos!ca slid the journal back into the folds of her pocket. 'Are you going to give me the truth?'

'Not possible, I'm afraid. There's no truth. There's only stories. Fact of organic life, apparently.'

'Stop it. You're being vague and annoying.'

'Really? Speaking as someone who doesn't think through a flabby piece of discoloured flesh, I feel I should point out that stories are the only things you organic types have got to keep your lives together. Neurologically speaking, you're not built for truth. You're built for constant reinvention. I told you.'

didn't I? Maybe every primitive has its story to offer. Maybe every paradise has its serpent to outsmart.'

Fos!ca thought about those last sixteen words for a few moments. Finally, she got the joke. She didn't think it was very funny, though. 'Answer me one question, then. Have I brought MEPHISTO back with me? Bernice shook off the curse by breaking its aesthetic. We think MEPHISTO let go of Ash and Lucretia at the same time, because they were her supporting cast. That doesn't mean it's over, though.'

'Hmm. Tricky.' God pretend-mulled it over. 'Let me put it this way. If I was responsible for letting loose an ancient archetypal evil, I'm sure I'd have the best of reasons.'

'Such as?'

'Oh, something to do with the future cultural development of the entire universe, I should think. It'll all make sense one day, believe me. Meanwhile, I suggest you get back to the Do[EO]C and make out your report. I know how much you love paperwork.'

'And what about !X?'

'I'll put him back in Paradise. Promise.'

Fos!ca sighed - deeply - then turned towards the edge of the grasslands, where the area met the Copperhead Floods. There was a travel terminus there, a few hundred metres away. She began the walk, her implant falling silent under her skin.

Officer Jyoti Gtxxlwyn was a stocky, well-built man in his forties, his muscles only slightly weighed down by the fat of middle age. His skin was pale, and he was almost entirely bald, a genetic kink of the Tylerkind which Goodwyn considered to be a mark of distinction.

It wouldn't be fair to say that all Republican Security Officers were alike. However, Jyoti Goodwyn had so much in common with the previous chief officer of the station that an outsider might have had trouble telling them apart. It was the way the Committee chose them, probably.

The office didn't feel as though it belonged to him, not yet. By all accounts, Officer Pupp had been a good man, one of

the few the Committee classified as 'incorruptible', and Goodwyn wanted to honour his memory by treating the place as if he were a guest here. At least, for the first few weeks.

'Honour his memory'. Strange phrase, bearing in mind that Pupp wasn't actually dead.

Nobody had as yet put together the full story of what had happened here. One Bernice Summerfield, ostensibly a tutor at St Oscar's University, had been imprisoned along with two accomplices. The log had her down as a genetic looter, but Goodwyn suspected Imperial connections. She'd been interviewed at length by Pupp; the transcript lay on the desk by the chunkputer, though Goodwyn hadn't read through it yet.

Then she and her companions had escaped. The exact method was unclear. The escape had gone unnoticed for several hours, until someone from Behavioural Analysis had turned up on the cell level with instructions to collect the V-footage of Summerfield's interview. In all, eight of the security staff had been put out of action, their faces scarred beyond repair by an unknown weapon. Pupp had suffered more damage than the rest. All eight were now in psychiatric care, but nobody had been able to get a word out of them. It was as if the world had suddenly become tot) hideous for the men to deal with.

And there'd been no sign of the Summerfield woman since the escape, two days ago. She'd be back on Dellah by now, back under the wing of the Empire. She'd destroyed the lives of eight good men, and she was going to get away scott free.

No. I'll think of something, Goodwyn told himself. Maybe even call in *Los Hombres de Sombra*. Nobody, not even an Imperial agent, messed about with the Force and got away with it. Reassuring himself with that thought, he turned to the interview transcript and began to read.

As he absorbed the text, something shifted in his stomach. More than once, there was a nervous itching in his forehead, and he found himself looking up at the portrait of Chairman Manx on the other side of the office, making sure the face of his beloved leader was still gazing down at him from the wall.